

## CHAPTER 4.

# DEVELOPING STUDENTS' WRITING AT QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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*Identifying who is responsible for academic writing at QUT is a challenge. The message gained from many years of experience is that any writing program needs to be implemented from an institutional perspective and be both top down and bottom up. It must be well planned, well funded, and well integrated within the teaching and learning framework of the university. Written from the perspective of the Language and Learning Unit, whose work in prior years has primarily benefitted international students through various services, this profile essay outlines the Unit's more recent approach to meeting the writing needs of all students. As a central provider of academic writing the Unit is using the Australian government's DEEWR/AUQA Good Practice Principles in a multifaceted approach with faculties to position writing, not only as a core skill required to satisfactorily complete assessment tasks, but over the longer term, as a key graduate attribute.*

## QUT—AN OVERVIEW

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) is an Australian university with an applied emphasis on courses and research. Based in Brisbane, QUT has an enrolment averaging 40,000 students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, including 6,000 from overseas. QUT has close links with industry, which complement theoretical learning with a practical perspective. Industry professionals contribute to course development, while academic staff also consult in industry.

QUT has three campuses. The main campus is located in the Central Business District while the Kelvin Grove campus (10 minutes by shuttle bus) houses the Creative Industries Precinct, Australia's first site dedicated to creative experimentation and commercial development in the creative industries. The Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation is also at Kelvin Grove. Caboolture is one

of Australia's newest campuses and is situated half-way between Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast.

### WHAT LITERACY AND WRITING MEAN AT QUT

QUT is structured to enhance students' learning and academic skills. Its approach to teaching and learning is articulated in the Manual of Policies and Procedures (MOPP), and the QUT Blue Print articulates the university's vision and goals to strengthen its reputation as a leading Australian university for quality teaching and learning, as well as to strengthen its distinctive national and international reputation by combining academic strength with practical engagement.

### WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ACADEMIC WRITING AT QUT?

While the importance of effective written and oral communication skills is identified broadly in the MOPP, it is not articulated clearly as an integral part of what academics should do in their daily teaching. It is not an uncommon expectation among academics that students should arrive at university with requisite written and oral communication skills firmly in place. Students who fail to meet this expectation are often seen as a problem for the support people in the library, International Student Services (ISS), or Learning Services. In other words, academics often see the professional staff as providing a remedial service to "fix the problem." One academic, who wishes to remain anonymous, confirmed this duality of teaching roles in a personal conversation in November 2009, when he stated, "I am a lecturer of economics, not a teacher of writing" (Nelson, 2009). It is clear therefore that addressing the issues around student writing requires a multifaceted approach that includes addressing the attitudes, focus, and perceptions of academic staff.

The approach to academic writing at QUT has historically been ad hoc. Apart from the occasional short-term funded project, there has been no coordinated attempt by the university to teach academic writing, even though it remains the most common form of assessment at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is interesting to note that QUT has no school or department of English or English Literature, and apart from the Faculty of Creative Industries—which offers Creative Writing and Literary Studies, Journalism, Media and Communication—there is no tradition of writing classes for undergraduate students. Since 2002, there has been no Faculty of Arts. Historically, the Language and Learning Unit within International Student Services has only provided ongoing academic writing support for international students and those from a non English-speaking background (NESB; these students in Australia are now referred to as CALD,

culturally and linguistically diverse), while the library has traditionally provided academic writing support predominantly for domestic students.

One effort, however, to address the issue of student literacy occurred in 1992, when Ros Petelin (2002), responding to a University-wide call for Teaching and Learning initiative proposals, implemented at QUT ‘the first Writing-across-the-Curriculum (WAC) program in the Australian Higher Education sector’ (Petelin, 2002, p. 98). The program was funded by an initial grant of \$45,000 and identified a need for a writing program through a survey of all full-time academic staff. As part of the WAC program, writing workshops were conducted “for faculty eager to learn and share strategies to integrate writing into their disciplines” (Petelin, 2002, p. 101). Handouts were developed, assessment tasks were redesigned for participating academics, faculty champions were brought on board, and “WAC designed and developed discipline-specific writing handbooks” for a number of schools (Petelin, 2002, p. 102).

Although many valuable activities and resources were developed as a result of this initiative, the program did not last. While feedback was positive, its lack of sustainability was attributed to a lack of resources for staffing and administrative support, particularly to maintain the development of materials and workshops in the classroom (Petelin, 2002, pp. 103-04).

In retrospect, it seems that writing development projects at QUT, including WAC, have not continued because they were very ambitious, not supported by all faculty academics, and rose and fell with the individuals driving them. Additionally, in terms of the WAC project, the unwillingness to link WAC with “the most obvious ally, the service units,” meant the project could not capitalise on existing resources of staff, funding, and administration, a component Petelin (2002, p. 105) identifies to being critical to the sustainability of an academic writing program. While ISS today is working hard to remove the remedial tag, it is one of the major ongoing providers of academic writing support.

In the search to identify who in 2011 is responsible for academic writing at QUT, it is apparent that any writing program must be implemented from an institutional perspective and be both top down and bottom up. It must be well planned, well funded, and well supported by a champion at a high level within the university.

## **ROLES OF THE QUT LIBRARY AND OF THE LANGUAGE AND LEARNING UNIT OF ISS**

The QUT Library now provides more extensive support for more students in more flexible ways. This model of service and support for learning skills is the

result of restructuring in tertiary institutions that has taken place since 2004. The emphasis on flexible delivery means that library staff have assumed responsibility for point-of-need support and ongoing development of academic and information literacy skills. The library also provides valuable generic resources such as Cite|write and Studywell (<http://www.studywell.library.qut.edu.au/>).

At the same time, the Language and Learning Unit in ISS has increased its role substantially as a teaching unit for academic skills, particularly academic writing. Since its establishment in 1990, the unit has provided academic writing support for international students in the form of one-to-one sessions, adjunct academic writing classes within faculties (for example MBA, Accounting, Engineering), and introductory sessions during University orientation at the start of each academic year. In response to the increasing number of international students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds enrolling in higher degree research (HDR) programs, the unit has also developed a range of programs to develop students' writing and research skills through intensive workshops and individual consultations. This central service model is now being expanded to include collaborative arrangements with faculties to provide embedded support for all QUT students. Our goal therefore at ISS is to make academic writing a part of the fabric of the faculties' teaching and learning practice for both international and domestic students.

## **WRITING—DISCIPLINES, GENRES, ASSIGNMENTS**

Undergraduate degrees at QUT are both three and four year, and students enrol in four units (subjects) each semester. Each unit generally requires three pieces of summative assessment, including a written assignment and/or presentation; tutorial participation and/or activity; and an end of semester written examination, though this exam may be limited to short-answer and multiple choice questions. Academics have tended to leave students to their own devices when it comes to writing assignments, assuming they already know how to write and in what genre, and that they know what the lecturer is expecting. However, the government's Bradley Review, Transforming Australia's Higher Education System, was implemented in 2009 to widen participation in universities, resulting in an increasingly diverse range of students—with an equally significant range of experiences—who have to complete academic writing tasks.

Yet even today, academics are still reluctant to model examples of essays, for a variety of reasons, including a fear of plagiarism. Few appear to have the skills set to deconstruct texts and teach students how to write in their discipline. International students, however, have had greater access to academic writing

support and can participate in generic academic writing programs presented by ISS during orientation week and the fourth week of each semester. These international students can make one-hour appointments to work with the Language and Learning Advisors in ISS, both face-to-face and online. The online service requires students to email their writing, task sheet, and criteria sheet to their Language and Learning Advisor by 9.00 AM on the day of their appointment. This service is used increasingly by the international students who work part time and/or find it difficult to access the university in the centre of the city. Feedback is via Microsoft Word “track changes,” and Advisors provide detailed suggestions to students on how to improve their writing. During busy periods in the semester, when many assessment tasks are due, it is always a challenge for the Advisors to balance the urgency of students wanting to have their writing “checked” before it is handed in with their role as language developers.

As noted earlier, the support for all students, particularly domestic, has increased with the new central services provided by the library. The library’s Information Literacy Coordinator, Judith Peacock, has stated One of the greatest attributes of this university is the extensive collaboration across the university, where the Library and ISS, for example, support each other in providing more comprehensive services for students via programs such as AusAid and Peer Mentoring. This institutional awareness of what particular groups or teams are doing across the university is exceptional, though personality driven. [...] However, we no longer have people in silos not sharing (Peacock, 2010).

## **PLANNING APPROACHES TO HELP STUDENTS GROW AS WRITERS**

A community of practice has played a significant role in how we, as Language and Learning Advisors in ISS, meet to discuss ways to help students grow as writers. Close collaboration among a core team of full-time advisors has led to the development of a variety of programs. One such program is the Introductory Academic Program (IAP) for newly enrolled AusAid scholarship students. Another is IRIS, the Introduction to Research for International Students, which was also developed in response to champion academics asking for support in their classrooms. This program later developed into the faculty specific Language Development Program (LDP). These programs are detailed below.

## SUCCESSSES IN TEACHING WRITING AT QUT

AusAid scholarships are highly-valued and aim to contribute to the long-term development needs of Australia's partner countries by providing scholarship holders with leadership skills and knowledge to drive change and influence the development outcomes of their own country (Australian Government 2009, p. 1). AusAid is a five week course and includes a one week "settling in" component and a four week intensive academic program. This program is designed by the ISS Language and Learning Unit and conducted each January and June prior to each new academic semester. The program enables students to develop and practice language and learning skills needed for success in their academic studies. The main academic focus is a project which links directly to each individual student's intended course of study and leads students through a series of tasks, which include: principles of effective academic writing; understanding criteria for assessment; starting to research and find references; developing listening and note-taking skills (with different guest lecturers from faculties in which the students are enrolled); reading and research strategies; article summary writing; understanding and exploring their projects—developing useful research questions; identifying the structure of, and deconstructing a typical essay; text analysis; literature review and using literature to support an argument, as well as using references effectively; report writing, academic language, and style; learning styles and strategies; oral presentation strategies; and advanced powerpoint strategies.

Students are required to present a summary of selected readings, a draft essay outline, and a final essay of 2,000 words, as well as an oral presentation of 10 minutes with a five minute question session. The teaching team members each present different sessions in the program, providing students a variety of teaching styles and accents.

Students respond positively to the program and their comments have included:

Great facilitation and support from the teachers in academic writing sessions.

These sessions actually made me improve my capacities and understanding.

A lovely program, makes me feel confident to take on the QUT challenge.

IAP is excellent in giving us a better understanding of what is expected in terms of academic writing.

IAP really improved my writing skills including planning and structuring. I've gained confidence in my work. (Song, 2010).

Student responses for the sessions on “Speaking in academic settings” have included:

For the first time, I learned how to write my own speech for presentations.

Helped a lot, especially the support and positive criticism was amazing.

Really good session. It gave me a chance to speak my ideas, and learn the methods from my peers and the lecturer that I can use to improve myself. (Song, 2010).

Another success story is the IRIS program, established in 2003 to address the needs of QUT’s international HDR students. All eligible students received an invitation to participate in the IRIS Program of six contact hours each week over seven weeks. Specifically, the program:

- supported newly-arrived international research students to adjust to the QUT academic culture
- provided practical experience in core written and oral communication skills critical to undertaking research at QUT
- established a positive and productive student/supervisor relationship. (Nelson, 2003.)

The IRIS Program experienced steady growth each year with 259 international HDR students successfully completing the program. Timely, relevant, and meaningful support was the key element, and content was framed to support students as they pursued their individual research projects. Engagement with the IRIS Program early in their candidature meant that these students developed a greater awareness of the requirements of their research proposal as well as greater confidence in communication (particularly with supervisors), plus a vital support network with other research students. The IRIS Program addressed the added challenges faced by HDR international students in terms

of language difficulties, social and family dislocation, financial hardship, and adjustment to an unfamiliar educational and research culture.

The IRIS Program was conducted twice a semester over two campuses and acknowledged the rigours and challenges of cultural adjustment by incorporating specific sessions on work-study-life balance. The issues of finding direction at the beginning of their research journey and understanding their new academic requirements were addressed by adopting a learner-centred approach in a supportive environment underpinned by the principles and practice of:

- authentic models of research work
- guided practice and feedback followed by individual practice
- active participation and engagement through independent learning

An IRIS participant in 2008 stated that “the IRIS program helped to clarify the HDR student process for me. It gave me support so that I don’t feel too isolated” (Nelson, Gonano, Lawson, & Reese, 2008). By providing collaborative learning opportunities, participants understood that they were part of a broader community of scholars. The Senior Student Forum allowed new and senior students to share, critique, and reflect on their respective postgraduate journeys. Students also supported “the short and sharp, relaxed cross-disciplinary environment”, and said that “one of the overall strengths of this course is the opportunity of presenting in front of a large group, and getting feedback for our writing” (IRIS participant in Nelson et.al., 2008).

Overall, the IRIS program made a significant contribution to teaching and learning at QUT and in 2007 won the QUT Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Excellence—in recognition of exceptional sustained performance and outstanding achievement in learning and teaching, client focus, and innovative and creative practice. It was subsequently nominated for a prestigious Carrick Award for Australian University Teaching in 2008.

## **THE NEW LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

However, the rapidly increasing number of international HDR students caused the Language and Learning Advisors to review the IRIS model. Developing writing skills is a long-term process and while the introductory programs, even those of an intensive nature such as IRIS and AusAid, provide a solid foundation, it was felt that a series of faculty-based programs rather than a broad-based interdisciplinary program would better target and meet the needs of this diverse student population.

The new Language Development Programs (LDP), launched by ISS in 2009, are conducted each semester in the Engineering, Science/IT, Education,



and Health Faculties and target the language needs, both written and spoken, of the international HDR student population as they work towards the milestones in their candidature: namely Stage 2 (LDP 1), Confirmation and Confirmation Presentation (LDP 2), Thesis (LDP 4) and Final seminar (LDP 5). LDP uses faculty-specific materials and detailed discourse analysis of authentic academic texts and student writing samples, along with an expanded range of support that includes oral communication skills, one-to-one (one hour) sessions and writing circles (LDP 3). These writing circles provide international students with a supportive peer-centred environment to meet in small groups within their community of scholars, where they can receive and offer non-judgemental feedback on their writing-in-progress. Continuing the momentum of the language development philosophy as established in LDP 1 and LDP 2, the ISS Language and Learning Advisors determined that students working together to support each other and facilitated by an Advisor would enable more students to become more independent writers. These writing circles are facilitated by an experienced Language and Learning Advisor who is able to highlight specific thesis writing tools and strategies.

Already the programs have been successful, as students understand that their PhD is actually a three-year research and writing journey. By participating in LDP they are better equipped to develop and edit their own writing. Professor Thambiratnam, who supervises a number of international HDR students, noted in an email to the Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering Research Officer that:

The English classes have been a tremendous help to these students. I and some of my colleagues have seen the marked improvement in the English of these students. One of my students recently submitted a paper to me and to the other 2 supervisors for review. All 3 of us agreed that the paper was very well written. This student was previously struggling with his English. I am writing to thank you and the Faculty for organising these classes. They were much needed and I hope that they will continue. (Thambiratnam, 2009).

Students see the programs as timely in terms of acquiring strategies to develop their own writing and speaking (Nelson, 2009). Specifically, LDP focuses on writing the abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, discussion, and results chapters as well as on presenting their confirmation and final defence. The Language and Learning teaching team also value LDP, as more students are participating in a writing program that is timely and developmen-

tal for each student. Contributing to the LDP's success is that one ISS teaching staff member is assigned to one faculty. The relationships built among the students, their supervisors, and the faculty are invaluable in helping students develop early on in their candidature the independence they need to write about their research. Meanwhile, the staff member develops a detailed understanding of faculty material, students' supervisors, and faculty organisers (as it is the faculty who promote the program, enrol the students and book the rooms and resources) to underpin this model of support.

## LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

2011 is a watershed year for academic writing at QUT. ISS staff are looking at ways to develop further the idea that academic writing is firmly embedded in the fabric of the university's teaching and learning. In 2010, we changed the name of our unit to the Academic Writing, Language and Learning Centre, with our ultimate aim to work as a key provider of academic writing development programs and to sustain an excellent level of support to all student writers.

Currently, the Language and Learning team is collaborating with the faculties of Health and Business on major programs to embed language and learning development within targeted units. These programs will serve as models of "good practice" based on the Australian government's DEEWR/AUQA Good Practice Principles (DEEWR/AUQA), which can be adapted for other ISS-Faculty collaborations across QUT. Significantly, they position writing, not only as a core skill required to satisfactorily complete assessment tasks, but over the longer term as a key graduate attribute.

These two programs include School-based/Unit-embedded workshops and activities developed in collaboration with unit lecturing staff and delivered at timely intervals throughout the semester. Cross-faculty language development workshops target key areas of need particularly in regard to professional and graduate skills development. These workshops are supplemented and extended throughout the semester by individual consultations and small-group writing circles.

When ISS and Language and Learning Advisors embed academic writing programs in the actual classroom or work with academics to incorporate a second-language perspective into their teaching, both international and domestic students benefit. Our goal to become an Academic Writing Centre for all students has evolved from our well-established and innovative language development programs and strategies.

Significantly in terms of sustainability, this work has now received funding from the highest levels of the university and has been included as part of the university's SISL (Support for International Student Learning) Project, a major initiative chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International and Development). This commitment reflects the renewed focus in 2011 on the quality of education, particularly for international students. This level of support is also evidence of the growing recognition at the highest levels that writing for all students is a fundamental process of learning which is inextricably linked to developing deep learning; it is a process that can be taught and learned as an embedded skill within a targeted unit where modelling and deconstructing texts will enhance student writing, hence understanding.

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