

# **Embedded Student Engagement Programs: Communication Skills in the Faculty of Arts and Monash Business School**

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## **Abstract**

*This session examines embedding student support in faculty programs. Ursula Wingate (2015) advocates for academic and professional staff to teach collaboratively with curriculum-integrated programs to better support students' academic literacy. This model has many strengths, however, it is also pertinent to consider how other kinds of support programs may work in the faculty-embedded program space. The English Connect program at Monash provides students with English language and intercultural communication skills in the co-curricular space using a peer model. In 2018, this program piloted having specific faculty offerings to engage students in communication skills directly relevant to their discipline. Working with Monash Business School and the Faculty of Arts, two different models of faculty embedding were used to best serve the differing needs of these student cohorts. This paper describes the specific ways that these programs were designed and the methods by which they are supporting students using the peer model within academic spaces.*

## **Context**

Increasing attention is being paid to embedded student support programs within academic units, with prominent researcher Ursula Wingate (2015) identifying Australian universities as being among the world leaders in this area. Wingate discusses the different levels of embedded programs, from entirely extra-curricular program through to the curriculum-integrated. She advocates for close collaboration between academics and writing experts within the university as well as for approaches that link tasks directly to credit-bearing assessment pieces. These approaches are ideal for the development of academic literacy, however, there is also scope within this research to investigate how other programs may also be embedded within faculty contexts for different reasons and using an alternate structure.

## **Embedding student engagement programs**

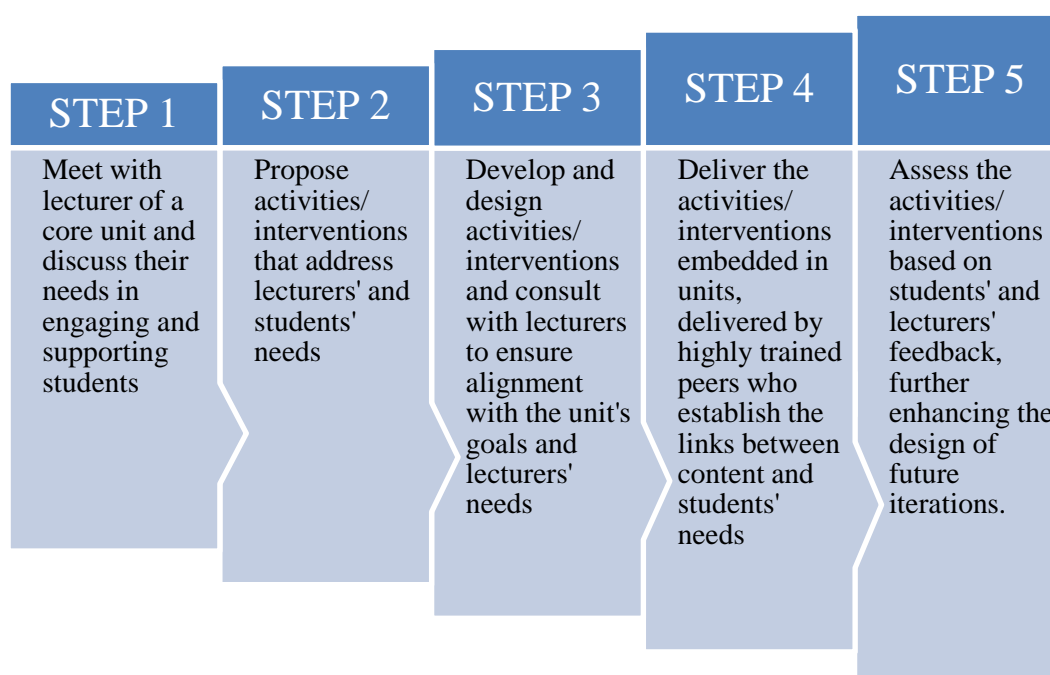
English Connect applies Wingate's recommendations for collaboration between academic and professional staff, however, other aspects of the programs have been modified to enact English Connect's focus on student engagement. Designed around peer interaction, English Connect programs are informed by research from Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith and McKay (2012) regarding the importance of peer relationships for students' sense of belonging, as well as scholarly expertise in the design of peer programs (Adam, Skalicky, and Brown, 2011; Biggs, 2007; Ramsden, 1992; Topping, 1996). This allows English Connect programs to improve academic literacy but to also focus on other aspects of students' learning, especially intercultural communication and professional communication skills.

## English Connect and the Faculty of Arts

Discussing best-practices that foster teaching and learning for international students in higher education, MacGregor and Folinazzo (2018, 323) rightly point out that:

Faculty are often overwhelmed and may lack training in how to deal in an effective manner with second language learners and the issues they bring with them (Bossio & Bylyna, 2006). It is notable that ‘many faculty members are inadequately prepared’ (Xu, 2015, 10); therefore, culturally relevant pedagogy, focusing on both the dominant culture and the ethnic students, will be beneficial for both DSs and ISs (Xu, 2015).

Focusing on a development model, in which collaboration between different actors is fostered to support international and domestic students, English Connect piloted the embedding of workshops within core units of the Master of Communications and Media degree. The collaboration aimed to meet the needs of students and lecturers as well as increasing the cultural diversity of student cohorts to enhance students’ intercultural competence.



**Figure 1.** The collaboration model between English Connect and the Faculty of Arts

The collaboration in the second semester of 2018 focused on developing students’ capabilities to work in culturally diverse groups and communicate effectively with individuals with different sociocultural norms and communicative repertoires. Table 1 describes the customized activities developed for Arts units by English Connect in 2018:

Unit	Activity offered	Activity focus	Number of students
<b>APG5894:</b> Communications theories and practices	1-hour workshop as part of week 1 tutorial	Group work & participation skills in cross-cultural settings	240 students
<b>APG5720:</b> Cultural tourism and events management	1.5-hour workshop as part of week 1 tutorial	Developing cross-cultural communication skills	75 students

<b>APG5060:</b> Advanced academic skills	1.5-hour workshop in week 5	Advanced grammar for university students	32 students
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**Table 1.** Overview of the collaboration between English Connect and the Faculty of Arts 2018

### **English Connect and Monash Business School**

In their study of peer group mentoring for workplace skills, Heikkinen, Jkinen and Tynjälä discuss the value of non-formal student interaction that includes intentional learning but occurs outside the classroom, arguing that students need ‘to recognize knowledge embedded in the operating environment and socially shared practices of the workplace’ (2012, 8). Peer group mentoring is particularly useful in acquiring this kind of knowledge because:

[a] significant part of this contextual and collaborative competence implies so-called tacit knowledge, which is not easy to express in words. Mastering this nonverbal social knowledge is a crucial part [of learning] ... which is addressed in peer-group mentoring with the help of joint reflection and discussion (8).

The emphasis on tacit knowledge and community engagement is supported by the findings of Gribble, Blackmore and Rahimi (2017), who conducted a 3-year longitudinal study of accounting graduates in Australia. They concluded that ‘international student connectedness both on campus and in the local community is closely linked to the development of key ‘employability’ skills’ (2017, 15). Indeed, ‘the key attributes required in order to succeed in the professional field of accounting are not necessarily developed via international students’ formal training at the university’ (33). Gribble et al. advocate for the importance of community engagement and networking for international students and the necessity of these activities being supported within but also outside of the formal academic classroom.

The Global Professional Communication suite embedded into the Monash Business School was designed around the importance of developing tacit knowledge and intercultural understanding through verbal and nonverbal communication skills. The structure allows students to perform 30 hours of professional development across the areas of global English skills, intercultural group work, presentation skills, professional workplace communication and global awareness. As the 30 hours is spread across their degree, this allows students to engage with wider contexts than if the content were delivered in consecutive classes. The program is delivered by peers with professional workplace experience, providing intentional learning through peer facilitators’ customizing and sharing content of greatest relevance for the students.

### **Evidence of Impact**

The Global Professional Communication suite piloted three programs designed for Monash Business School alongside other core English Connect offerings in 2018. There were a total of 371 students engaged in these programs. For the program Business Talk, 78% of students stated that they only had a fair, average or poor understanding of workplace communication when commencing, but by the end of the program, 87% of students surveyed stated that they now had a good or excellent understanding of effective workplace communication.

For the Faculty of Arts collaboration, students completed surveys at the end of each workshop or activity. Asked to assess the extent to which they had developed their group work skills in cross-cultural environments, 50% of the students reported that they felt their group work skills were excellent, and a further 42% of the students felt that their group work skills was satisfactory. Students also provided a number of written survey responses that highlighted how useful the embedded workshops were to them.

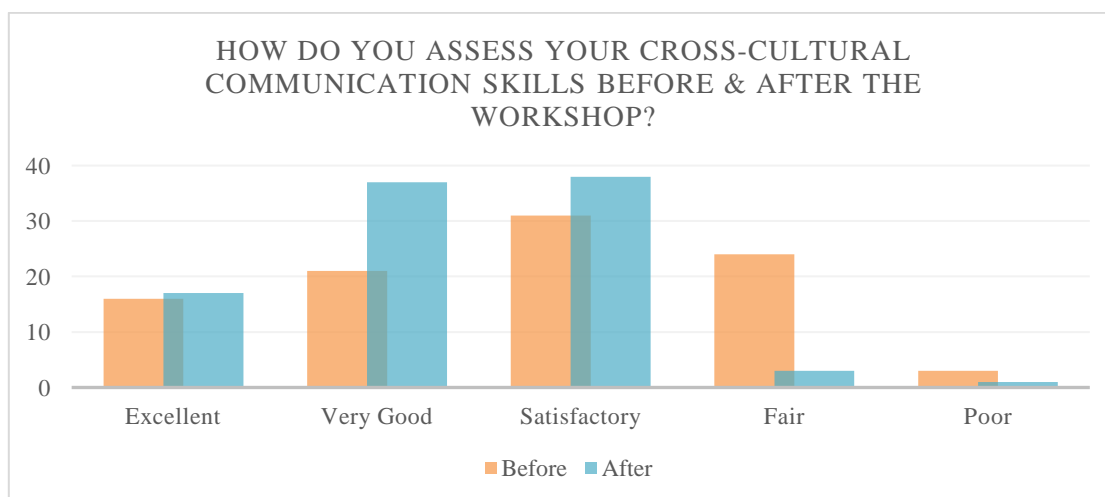
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When prompted to assess the extent to which the workshops embedded as part of their units were useful to their learning and met their needs, the majority of the students responded positively as shown in table 2.

Statement	APG5894	APG5720	APG5060
<i>The collaboration between English Connect and my unit is useful for my learning.</i>	91% strongly agree or agree	88% strongly agree or agree	84% strongly agree or agree
<i>The content of the workshop is appropriate for my needs.</i>	88% strongly agree or agree	88% strongly agree or agree	76% strongly agree or agree

**Table 2.** Students’ self-assessment of the usefulness of the collaboration for their learning.

In addition, this, students also self-assessed their cross-cultural communication skills (both spoken and written) before and after the workshops, as demonstrated in graphs 1. The scaffolded and tailored opportunities that the embedded workshops provide students seemed to be a fertile starting point for the lifelong learning development required for cross-cultural communications skills.



**Graph 1.** Students’ self-assessment of their cross-cultural communication skills across units APG5060, APG5720 and APG5894

### Future Directions

Currently English Connect programs embedded into the Faculty of Arts are in single units. Future directions for this program include mapping the support offerings over a degree, namely, Media and Communication studies. This would allow students to build their intercultural competency over a number of units, and also allow activities to build on each other. In July 2019 the English Connect Monash Business School programs will be trialed as an intensive two day workshop, with students being able to complete 50% of the hours towards their Statement of Attainment: Global Professional Communication during this time. This offering will also include an industry networking evening and will run straight after exams. If successful, more intensives will be offered, likely at times between semesters, in semester breaks or after exams to allow students to build professional competency skills at times that do not compete with classes or assignment submission times.

### STARS Session Outline

Embedded student engagement programs: Communication skills in the Faculty of Arts and Monash Business School, emerging initiative

The session will include a discussion of the background of the program and emerging evaluation before moving into audience participation around the following questions:

1. What kinds of programs can be embedded into faculty offerings, and what are the benefits or drawbacks of this model?
2. In addition to support or communication programs, where else might peer programs be useful within faculty offerings?
3. One of the key aspects that Wingate identifies for successful faculty-embedded programs is collaborative teaching. How might academic and professional staff as well as knowledgeable peers model collaboration within the classroom? What kinds of forms could this take?

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