

# **Inclusive Whole of Institution Language support: the Embedding Academic language Framework at UTS**

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## **Abstract**

*The Embedding Academic Language Framework, designed and implemented by the Academic Language & Learning team at University of Technology Sydney (UTS), is intended to provide whole-of-institution, contextualised academic language support for commencing students in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework degrees. The development of the framework was motivated by: TEQSA requirements; studies which show that EAL students at university require direct instruction in order to improve their grammatical complexity and accuracy (e.g. Knoch et al. 2014); and UTS's commitment to producing work-ready graduates. The framework has four stages: 1. screening of all commencing students; 2. language development tutorials for those identified as requiring support; 3. milestone tasks to evaluate language development in an assessment task and 4. further milestone tasks at various points in the degree programs. This report outlines the design, implementation and ongoing evaluation of an innovative and effective approach to language support.*

## **Background and Rationale for the project**

In recent years, there has been extensive reporting on university-wide approaches to addressing English language proficiency amongst university students (e.g. Dunworth, 2013; Harris, 2016; Murray & Hicks, 2016; Harper, 2013). Murray and Hicks (2016) clearly identify some of the key drivers for the need to develop university wide strategies for English language. These drivers include the Good Practice Principles for English Language Competence for International Students (DEEWR 2009), monitoring of English language by the Tertiary Educational Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), and concern about students' communication levels among employers.

Prior to 2018, a whole of institution approach to supporting students through transitions in language development was already in place at University of Technology Sydney (Hoadley and Hunter, 2017). Commensurate with other universities, Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practice at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) targets the entire student body, native and non-native English speakers, by addressing language development in the core curriculum (Dunworth et al., 2014). Although this whole of institution approach was generally successful, ongoing evaluations of practices in individual faculties indicated it was not servicing the students entering with lower levels of English language. Students whose language level was too low to benefit from a combination of ALL practices and services were evidenced by low or failing subject grades and subject academics' anecdotal evidence, creating institutional concerns.

In March and April 2018 the UTS Vice-Chancellor's Management Group (VCMG) considered and endorsed a proposal to develop and implement a whole-of-institution approach for

embedding academic language support at a curriculum level that builds on and extends the support and programs already in place for UTS students.

Three key drivers led to the VCMG proposal, both internal and external.

- *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015*  
UTS is required to provide evidence of compliance with standards relating to English language proficiency. In particular, Standard 1.1 (Admission)<sup>1</sup> and 1.3 (Orientation and Progression)<sup>2</sup>.
- *UTS 2027 Strategy*  
The *Personalised Learning Experience* initiative of the UTS 2027 Strategy addresses provision of high-quality support across academic and non-academic needs, with a particular focus on English language development for International Students.
- *UTS student and graduate outcomes*  
Findings from students and staff evaluations have identified that academic language and learning services are not reaching some students who enter with lower levels of English language proficiency.

### **Aim of Embedding Academic Language Framework**

The Embedding Academic Language Framework provides a systematic approach for embedding the UTS English Language Policy in the curriculum to support student attainment of graduate outcomes. The Embedding Academic Language Framework Project was established to develop the approach to embedding Academic language in the curriculum.

#### *Key Deliverables*

- To design a framework that will provide interventions to identify and support students' Academic language needs to better equip them to succeed in their university studies.
- To embed ongoing, visible, measurable language development in each faculty throughout all degree programs
- To implement the framework across the university (within each faculty)
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the framework both to ensure quality delivery and review and revise the framework

The project is led by the Academic Language & Learning (ALL) Team (Institute for Interactive Media & Learning), and is being implemented in collaboration with Associate Deans Teaching and Learning (ADTLs) and their delegates.

### **Establishment and principles**

The Embedding Academic Language Framework Project was established in May 2018. The ALL Team held briefing meetings with ADTLs and relevant faculty Teaching and Learning staff to outline the project goals and agree on responsibilities. All faculties acknowledged the importance of the framework and identified issues to be addressed for successful implementation. These included the need for adequate resourcing and ensuring the framework design could be applied to courses which have multiple student progression paths. The project is guided by the following principles.

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<sup>1</sup> HES Standard 1.1 (Admission) requires higher education providers to ensure that admitted students have the academic preparation and proficiency in English needed to participate in their intended study.

<sup>2</sup> HES Standard 1.3 (Orientation and Progression) requires higher education providers to have strategies in place to identify students in need of additional support, and to provide of support services to help them succeed.

*Build on what is already in place to ensure the framework is sustainable and scalable.* The Framework complements and extends the support and programs already in place. Approaches for assessing students, wherever possible, build on existing tasks or subjects.

*Partner with faculty and, where possible, students to build capacity and achieve outcomes.* Responsibilities for Academic language development support and student success are shared by faculties, ALL Group and UTS senior management, and students themselves. The development and implementation of the Framework requires a collaborative approach, and responsibilities and accountabilities must be clearly identified and communicated.

*Position approaches in the discipline and professional context.* Developing language through subject and discipline-specific materials ensures that approaches are sensitive to the discipline and professional context and will support student achievement of course outcomes.

## **Framework design**

This phase involved design of the framework and the Academic language-level assessment mechanisms, and the development and implementation of processes to support the pilot phase. The design of the framework commenced in June 2018 for piloting from Semester 2, 2018. The findings from the pilot were used to inform the full implementation of the framework, most notably in making the completion of the OPELA task for all commencing students and follow-up language development activities (for identified students) both mandatory and with negative consequences for non-completion.

The framework is illustrated in Figure 1. It consists of four stages: language screening; follow up support; milestone assessment task; further follow up support.

The first stage of language screening involves all commencing students undertaking an online post enrolment task in week 1. The screening task is embedded into one of their core disciplinary subjects. The screening tool Online Post Enrolment Language Assessment (OPELA) was selected as the key mechanism for screening the Academic language levels of commencing students in Week 1. OPELA is an existing screening tool that has been in use at UTS since 2013, and has been both externally and internally validated (Elder & Knoch 2009; UTS internal publication 2017). It is automatically marked and has three levels: Basic; Intermediate, and Good. Faculties are also given the option of using a written in-class task. The university learning management system (LMS) was expanded to include processes to manage OPELA subject enrolments, student completions and results. This allowed students to receive results and feedback regarding further language support requirements immediately.

The second stage of the framework is the Subject specific Language Development Tutorials (LDTs), which were identified as the most appropriate mechanism to provide follow-up support for students who receive a Basic level in OPELA. The LDTs are designed to develop students' discipline-specific language and literacy skills. The LDTs provide students with at least 15 to 20 hours of face-to-face; this is the minimum required for language activities to have an impact on student learning. The 90-minute LDTs typically run from Week 3 to Week 12, alongside the core subject activities. Materials need to be designed for each participating subject by the ALL Team prior to start of session. Working with the Student Administration Unit, the ALL Team created a new activity code within the timetable system to enable students to self-enrol into a Language Development Tutorial.

The third stage of the framework involved identifying an assessment task within the targeted core discipline subject which became a milestone task. The milestone task is an existing individual assignment requiring students to display their discipline-specific language and

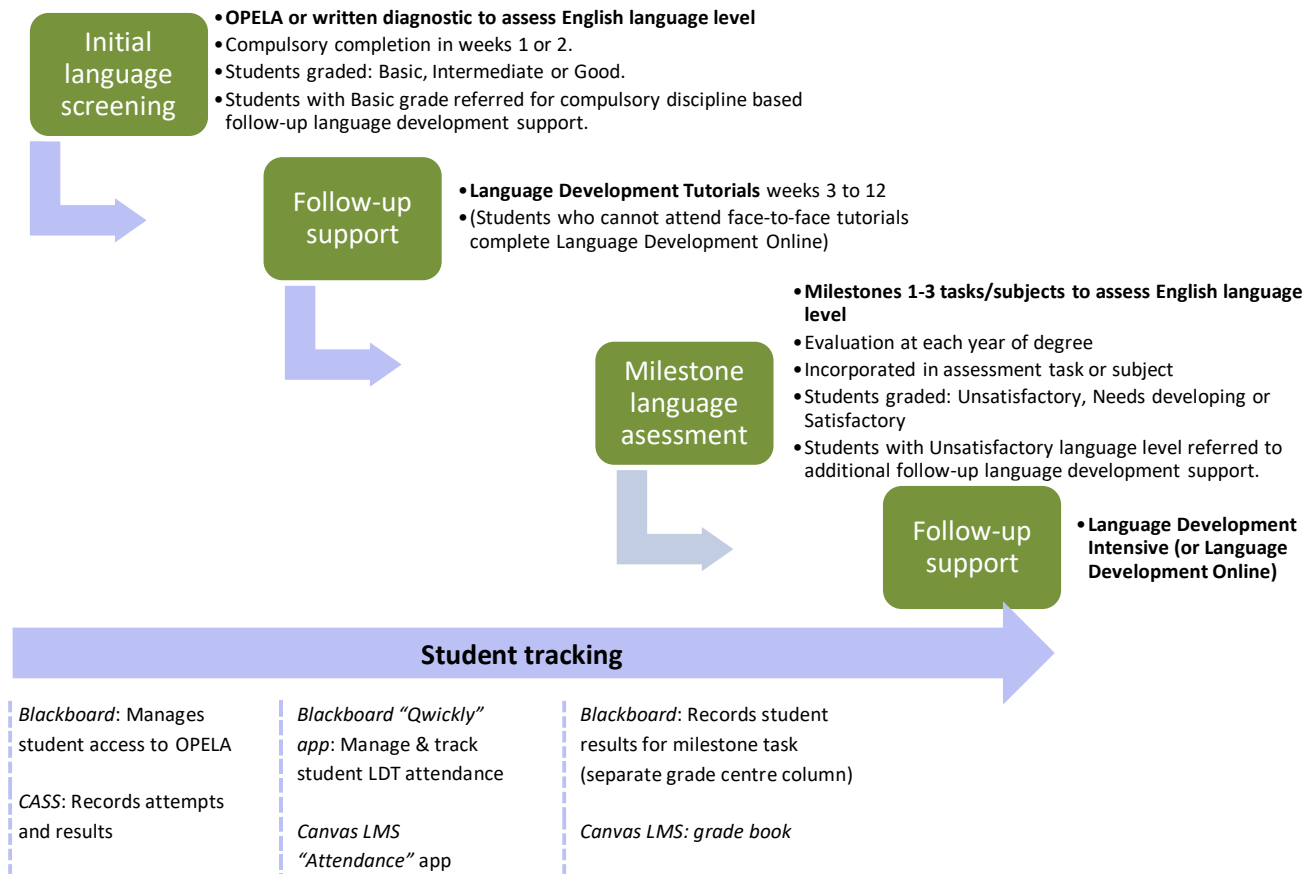
literacy skills. The ALL team worked with subject coordinators to identify these tasks. Language descriptors for assessing Academic language in written assessments were developed by the ALL Team. In collaboration with the ALL team, Faculties established threshold levels of language that students needed to meet in the milestone assessment tasks. Students who do not meet the threshold level are required to participate in further follow up language support.

The fourth stage of the framework focused on this follow-up language support for students failing to meet the Milestone Academic language thresholds. The Language Development Intensive was developed by the ALL Team to provide follow-up support for students not meeting the language expectations of their faculty. The Language Development Intensive is a five-day intensive workshop which runs the week before the start of the next commencing session. It focuses on developing discipline-specific written and spoken language. An online option was also developed for students who cannot attend the Language Development Intensive.

As the language screening, LDTs and milestone task are compulsory components for students, it was necessary to develop clear communications for both students and subject coordinators, in addition to processes to track student compliance with the language screening and attendance at LDTs. The ALL Team worked with the university IT department to design processes to integrate OPELA results into the LMS grade centre and Curriculum and Student Systems (CASS). Communications were developed for students and subject coordinators regarding the benefits and requirements of the project/framework, and information is also included in subject outlines. An OPELA Website also provides students with information about the requirements.

## Implementation

Figure 1 illustrates the implementation of the Embedding Academic Language Framework



## **Figure 1: Language level assessment, follow-up support and student tracking**

### **Outcomes**

The Framework is central to realising UTS's commitment to supporting students to develop their Academic language skills for higher education and professional life beyond university. It is anticipated that the Framework will contribute to:

1. Recognition by teaching staff (including heads of program, course directors and heads of school) of the relevance and critical importance of the development of students' academic and professional language
2. Recognition by students of the relevance and critical importance of the development of their academic and professional language
3. Enhanced learning outcomes for all students, especially those with an English as an Additional Language (EAL) background.
4. Increased student and employer satisfaction with graduate communication skills.
5. Strengthened accountability and reporting for quality enhancement and assurance, internally and externally.

Recognition of the importance of development of student language, and enhanced student learning are desirable and achievable outcomes in any educational context (Framework outcomes 1, 2 & 3). The development of the Embedding Academic Language Framework has been informed by the current literature on embedding academic literacies including English language. It is now well established that academic language and literacies are most effectively acquired if developmental opportunities for learners are integrated and embedded within specific disciplinary contexts (Dudley-Evans, 2001; Hood, 2011; Lea & Street 1998, 2006; Wingate 2006, 2015). TEQSA Threshold Standards around curriculum mapping and whole of course coherence have drawn attention to the need to scaffold the early acquisition of essential academic skills and literacies in tandem with disciplinary knowledge and capabilities (Kift, 2015).

For students with English as an additional language (EAL), in particular, improvements in English language are likely to occur when language support is integrated with discipline specific content and assessment tasks (Brooman-Jones, Cunningham, Hanna & Wilson 2011; Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2015; Froman, 2012). The Framework facilitates the delivery of what Kift calls "just-in-time, just-for-me tailored support" (2015, p.54). The Framework will contribute to student and employer satisfaction levels with graduate communication (Outcome 4) as it is designed to screen language levels, provide discipline specific language support, follow up and track student language levels throughout their degree courses. In addition, it can provide UTS students with measurable and reportable documentation of their language development.

Accountability and reporting for quality assurance purposes are a crucial aspect of tertiary performance (Outcome 5). In order for the Framework to be implemented, we have had to develop university wide systems and procedures. As academic language developers, the ALL team has had to shift our focus to planning and implementing at an institutional rather than subject level, which required taking into account the project's numerous stakeholders (management, students, academic and professional staff). The systems generated by the Framework to provide data on the effectiveness of discipline specific student support, monitor student performance data and review and assess the impact of the Framework have strengthened the evidence base available for internal and external reviews.

## **Application in other contexts**

By implementing the Framework, we have managed and mitigated an issue of current concern to university leadership that can be broadened and adapted across the tertiary sector. Through disseminating the organisation of the Framework to the broader higher education community and demonstrating how it has been implemented across the university, we are encouraging members of the community to think of possibilities in their local environment, whether at subject, faculty or institutional level. They might identify ways of supporting language development across their institutions by analysing their current conditions and utilising available resources.

As outlined in the rationale, the enrolment of large numbers of tertiary students with English as an additional language (EAL) has resulted in many approaches undertaken by universities to enhance the language ability of these students. In recent years, there has been much reporting on the need for such approaches to be implemented across the institution. However, despite the urgency for adopting a university wide approach, to date, there is little evidence of systematic, connected, whole of institution approaches (Kift, 2015) and such approaches are rare (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). This may be, as Murray and Hicks (2016, p.184) note, because “the challenges associated with conceptualising and implementing a holistic and systemic, institution-wide approach to English that has the potential to benefit all students are formidable”. The UTS Embedding Academic Language Framework has met the challenges of implementing an institution wide approach. By disseminating our approach, we are demonstrating that the challenges, while many, varied and often unexpected, are not insurmountable, and that our approach, while complex, could be adapted for use across a range of tertiary contexts.

However, we realise that not all our colleagues have the institutional leadership support that is crucial to the successful implementation of the Framework. In such cases, a more achievable take up of our practice may be at a ‘practice by practice’ level. Our practices of language screening on entry, discipline based tutorials, use of language framework and data tracking were already in place and were drawn together to design and implement the Framework. We encourage our colleagues to reflect on their local conditions and practices to see where the development of language within subjects and within faculties can be enabled and/or supported. We encourage questioning what resources currently exist or could be shared across programs or institutions to support academic language development, thus facilitating development of greater awareness of local conditions which constrain or enable whole-of-institution language development. Members of the ALL team have given and continue to give presentations to other Australian universities on the Embedding Academic Language framework, particularly on the use of the screening tool and how to provide follow-up language support.

## **Wider implications**

*Strengthening university policies:* The wider implications of the Embedding Academic Language Framework relate to strengthening university policies around the development of and support for students’ academic and professional literacies. As a direct consequence of the implementation of the Embedding Academic Language framework, UTS senior management has consulted with key stakeholders, including the academic language and learning team, associate deans teaching and learning from all faculties and UTS International staff to enact new rules. Some of these rules pertain to ensuring that student development of academic language is the responsibility of staff and students. Other rules refer to timely notification for international students of requirements regarding mandatory language screening and

participation in language development activities. These changes serve both to emphasise that students' language development is a whole-of-institution responsibility and to enhance the reputation of UTS as a higher education provider which puts significant resources towards supporting all students' disciplinary and professional communication practices. This can have a flow-on effect to other higher education institutions, especially in the current environment of TEQSA.

*Disseminating good practice:* As stated previously, the ALL team recognises that not all higher education institutions will have the kind of leadership support to implement the Embedding Academic Language framework. The theory of practice architectures (TPA) developed by Kemmis and colleagues (e.g. 2014, 2017) is thus being used as a way of communicating to the wider Australian higher education community how the Embedding Academic Language framework can be adapted to different contexts, as long as the local conditions of the context are understood. This is because, in common with other practice theories, TPA acknowledges the situatedness of practices – that they belong to a particular place and time, and unfold in ways that are shaped by specific conditions (Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 33). TPA considers the conditions (cultural-discursive, material-economic, & social-political arrangements) – as the architectures of a site of practice (local) which prefigure how practices unfold within that site. When the ALL team conducts workshops on the Embedding Academic Language framework, we present the local conditions at UTS which enabled the development of the framework, and we ask participants to consider their own contexts to see what might enable and constrain the development of an embedding Academic language framework. Participants are thus encouraged to think about their own institutional contexts in a fresh light, and to adapt elements of the framework which would suit their local conditions.

## **Impact**

The Embedding Academic Language framework strongly aligns with key organising principles of transition pedagogy, notably that of diversity: “*The curriculum should be attuned to student diversity and must be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students*” (Kift 2009). A significant difference between the UTS Embedding Academic Language framework and other whole of institution approaches is that it does not single out international students for screening and support. One of the key tenets of the Embedding Academic Language framework acknowledges that language support is needed by domestic and international students, and that assumptions about the academic readiness of students need to be based on more than a student's language background or length of time spent in Australia. By screening all commencing students, the framework attempts to ensure that access to targeted, discipline-specific language support will be provided to those students in most need. Through the embedding of language development across the institution and within the curriculum, the Embedding Academic Language framework reflects an enabling view of language development and explicitly rejects the ‘deficit’ model, whereby students are assumed to enter the academy with sufficient academic literacy to be able to deal with the demands of higher education. In the ‘deficit model, those students who are deemed to be academically under-prepared – lacking time management, knowledge of academic referencing conventions and academic literacy – are remediated through study skills programs. As Lea and Street note, “The study skills approach has assumed that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts” (1998, p. 159). This approach has been critiqued by several authors (e.g. Lea & Street 1998; Wingate 2007), who point out that the separation of writing from the content and context in which the writing takes place will result in remediation for those individuals who choose to attend generic writing workshops, but will make no lasting changes to improving students' disciplinary literacy overall. Students may learn how to

structure an essay but not how to answer an assignment question that requires them to integrate information and construct an evidence-based argument (Wingate 2007).

Although the majority of academic literacy specialists working in Australian universities do not share the view of writing as study skills, it is widely held by university managers and student support service providers (Bury & Sheese 2016; Lea & Street 1998; Williamson & Goldsmith 2013). The Embedding Academic Language framework disrupts the ‘study skills perspective’ as it places contextualised disciplinary language development at the centre of its approach. The design and implementation of the framework require that university managers acknowledge the situatedness of disciplinary discourses, and that the development of such discourses needs to be evaluated in disciplinary and subject-specific contexts. The Embedding Academic Language framework thus militates against isolating language development from the development of disciplinary knowledge, and ensures that all students are included in strategies which provide language support.

Another key principle of transition pedagogy is that of “assisting students’ transition *from* their previous educational experience *to* the nature of learning in higher education and learning in their discipline” (Kift, 2009, p.40). An intrinsic element of The Embedding Academic Language framework is the support provided for students to transition into the disciplinary discourses of their chosen degree program. The impact of the framework is resulting in changes to the teaching practices of the subject coordinators whose subjects are targeted for screening and language development tutorials, as revealed in the ongoing evaluation of the framework. Many subject coordinators reported that they were making changes to the subject content using the information and/or materials from the language development tutorials. Several changes involve scaffolding of specific writing tasks, or of making expectations about assessment tasks more explicit.

The Embedding Academic Language framework promotes student achievement: it facilitates the delivery of just-in-time tailored support not only within a disciplinary context but within a subject-specific context, enabling students to undertake their assessment tasks with a clearer understanding of what the tasks require, and with greater confidence in their disciplinary communication practices. In focus group interviews conducted as part of the longitudinal evaluation of the framework (informed consent was obtained as per the requirements of the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee), students commented that as a consequence of participating in the language development tutorials, they have a better understanding of how to structure their assignments, they are more confident in participating in tutorial discussions, and in their everyday communication with fellow-students.

When students participate in the language development activities in the framework, they are made aware of and are strongly encouraged to make use of UTS support services and resources. For example, students can be asked to access and review the UTS support services as part of their pre- or post-class language development tutorials. As reported in an ongoing study by Tracy Ware, research has shown that weaker students tend to avoid attending language support and these students are also underrepresented or not present in studies on PELA and language support (e.g. Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth & Harris, 2011; Beatty, Collins & Buckingham, 2014; Briguglio, 2014; Dunworth, 2010; Hirsh, 2007; O’Donovan, 2014; Read & von Randow, 2013; Rochecouste et al., 2010; Weaver, 2006, *in* Ware 2019). Ware argues that by embedding the language development within a subject, support is normalised, thus removing the ‘deficit’ model of language learning and acquisition (2019). The Embedding Academic Language framework normalises both embedded language support within subjects across all faculties and the accessing of support services.



## Conclusion

This report has outlined the design, implementation and ongoing evaluation of an innovative and effective approach to language support, which is institution-wide and discipline-specific. By presenting this report to member of the STARS community, we hope that others may be encouraged to adopt or adapt the Embedding Academic Language framework, in whole or in part. We also hope to develop greater awareness of institutional conditions which may constrain or enable whole-of-institution language development, and to build networks within and across institutions to share resources which enable and support language development.

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