

Writing Blah, Blah, Blah: Lecturers' Approaches and Challenges in Supporting International Students

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The increase in numbers of international students who have English as a second language (ESL) and are studying in English-medium universities has renewed the emphasis of English language development in higher education, particularly concerning academic writing. Much of the discussion has concentrated on developing best practices in providing support via Language and Academic Support (LAS) programs. However, the main challenge in recent years has focused on integrating disciplinary and language learning. What has been largely missing from the discussion are the views of lecturers and students regarding the strategies they use to develop academic writing in the discipline. This paper addresses this issue. The analysis reveals that academic writing within the disciplines is largely an individual endeavor for both lecturers and their students. Lecturers focus on explaining what skills students are required to demonstrate in their assignments, but students are more concerned with understanding *how* they can develop these skills. The implications are discussed concerning the development of a whole institutional approach for integrating language and disciplinary teaching.

International students constitute around 25% of the whole student population (AEI, 2009) and contribute significantly to the financial revenue, academic environment, and sociocultural life of Australian institutions. The sustainability of the education export sector depends largely on the extent to which universities are adequately addressing international students' diverse needs. In recent times, English language development of international students has become a critical issue in Australia. Research indicates that despite the English language entry requirements of universities, international students for whom English is a second language need to develop their English language skills while studying for their degree (O'Loughlin & Murray, 2007; Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). Many universities have Language and Academic Support (LAS) programs available to assist international students with their English language skills. However, these programs are offered as a support and sit outside of the main teaching within the discipline (Wingate, 2006; Arkoudis, 2008), with many international students not accessing these services (von Randow, 2005; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). This means that subject lecturers are often the contact point for international students seeking to understand and develop their academic writing skills. Yet, in terms of research, very little is known about how lecturers address the needs of international students. The aim of this paper is to investigate the strategies lecturers use in order to offer some insights into bridging the gap between language and disciplinary learning and teaching within higher education institutions.

Support for Students

The fast growth in the number of international students has created numerous challenges for students,

lecturers and support staff in relation to pedagogic practices. International students' experiences in host countries have been largely documented in a number of studies conducted in English-speaking countries such as the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada (Grayson, 2008; Holmes, 2004; Ridley, 2004; Tran, 2008; Wang, 2009). In addition, the provision of support for international students is a topic of continuing interest and debate that has attracted an important emerging stream of research (Dunstan, 2007; Fallon, 2006; Forbe-Mewett, 2008; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009).

Research indicates that from international students' perspectives, support from lecturers is cited as important in assisting international students in their learning and participation in disciplinary practices (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Tran, 2008). However, international students in these studies also commented that lecturers vary greatly in the level and ways of support that they provide. In terms of providing support with academic writing, written feedback on their assignments appeared to be the preferred form of feedback for international students, as this indicates that lecturers have put more time and effort into commenting on students' work (Kingston & Forland, 2008). All students in Tran's study found the opportunities to establish dialogue with their lecturers valuable in helping to increase their understandings of the academic expectations on specific assignments and to engage as active participants in disciplinary practices (Tran, 2008).

Academic writing is widely recognized as a key skill that influences student success in tertiary education. However, most of the research focusing on issues related to supporting international ESL students

in their academic writing has been largely concerned with exploring the ways that LAS programs within the institution assist these students (Felix & Lawson, 1994; Woodward-Kron, 2007). There has been little research investigating the strategies employed by lecturers to support international students. One of the few studies published has investigated how lecturers in the Melbourne Law School have utilized discipline-specific exercises as a screening tool to help identify domestic and international students who need assistance with disciplinary language and writing skills (Larcombe & Malkin, 2008). However, the focus of this program was to identify students who require support, rather than how lecturers can support these students. Once identified, the responsibility for supporting the students with weaknesses in writing and communication skills appears to be passed to academic support advisors. Given that academic writing at tertiary level is very much discipline-driven, capturing the perceptions and practices of those lecturers directly involved in teaching international students is of great significance. The study reported in this paper attempts to address the paucity in research by exploring how lecturers in two disciplines at an Australian university draw on a number of strategies to respond to the needs of international students in relation to completing written assignments for their course.

Lecturers' Views Toward Teaching International Students

There is a growing body of research that explores academics' perspectives with regard to working with international students (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Trice, 2003; Trice, 2005; Fallon & Brown, 1999; Robertson et al., 2000). However, most of these studies focus more on examining lecturers' views on international students' challenges and learning practices rather than their strategies in working with, and supporting, international students. The findings from Robertson et al.'s (2000) study showed that lecturers appear to attribute the problems facing international students as being related to their reluctance to participate in discussion, a lack of understanding of the lecture content and terminology, a heavy reliance on books, lack of independent learning, and lack of critical thinking skills. Contrary to the findings highlighted in Robertson et al.'s research, Kingston and Forland's (2008) study found that lecturers range from viewing international students as problematic to seeing them as highly adaptive learners and capable of adding 'a fresh perspective' to the learning environment. The difference in the findings of these studies seems to arise from the fact that one of the key research questions of Robertson et al.'s study focuses on lecturers' perceptions of the difficulties international students

experience, while the other researchers frame their questions to elicit lecturers' comparisons of international and local students, thereby opening up the possibility to acknowledge international students' capacity to adapt and add value to the learning environment.

Examining lecturers' perceptions of international students' needs, the benefits they bring and the challenges they may pose to the department was the focus of a study at a top Midwestern research-university in the US by Trice (2003; 2005). Drawing on interviews with 50 faculty members and four student leaders in four academic departments, Trice's (2003) research showed that departments and faculty members found it challenging to respond to issues such as communicating effectively with students, enhancing the integration between home students and international students, and evaluating international students' language skills. According to the lecturers interviewed, the contributions international students make to the department included enriching the learning culture by providing international perspectives, bringing diverse work experience, helping lecturers establish international linkages, enhancing the departmental reputation, representing the high quality of students, and filling research assistantships for the department (Trice, 2003). Trice (2005) found however that lecturers still possess an ethnocentric view of international students' learning characteristics. Her study highlights that in addressing the challenges with regard to working with international students, individual departments tried to "make decisions in isolation and without tapping into the resources that were available for them" (p.86). In particular, the good practices used by faculty members to accommodate international students' needs and support their learning were not shared formally. Researchers have claimed that lecturers are unsure about what approach to take in addressing the issues arising from teaching international students (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Trice, 2003; Ryan & Carroll, 2005). Individual lecturers appear to struggle to accommodate the unfamiliar characteristics and complex needs of a diverse student body. How to incorporate the principles of diversity and inclusion into pedagogic practices in order to create a culturally responsive learning environment is a primary challenge faced by lecturers in different educational sectors (Ryan & Carroll, 2005). The lack of guidance to assist lecturers in their efforts to teach international students and a lack of clear policy guidelines at a systemic level have also been highlighted in related studies (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Trice, 2003, 2005).

The above discussion highlights that most of the research in this area involves identifying the problems that international students encounter with their

academic writing rather than focusing on the strategies that lecturers use to support their students' learning. This study attempts to investigate the strategies developed by lecturers and uses positioning theory (Harré 2005; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) to analyze the data. Implicit in this theory is the issue of agency and how lecturers justify the decisions they make. Harré and van Langenhove stress the importance of what they call moral agency, which is defined as social and purposeful action. In discussing how lecturers support international students with academic writing in their disciplines, we consider issues of community and agency, which, as Harré and van Langenhove note, comprise a reciprocal relationship. In this paper, community refers to 'university' and agency to the intentional actions of the lecturers as they position themselves in relation to their international students' learning needs. The concept of positioning provides a way of exploring the extent to which lecturers' actions are maintained or constrained by the institutional practices of the university. The following framework is used in the analysis of the data:

- Self-positioning, where a person takes on a particular stance in order to achieve a particular goal.
- Other positioning, which is implicit within the act of self-positioning; to take a position results in positioning the other person in a particular way.

Research Approach

This paper is derived from a larger study that explored international students' adaptation to disciplinary academic writing in the disciplines of education and economics at an Australian University and the ways in which lecturers address international students' academic needs. This paper focuses mainly on the lecturers' views and reflections on their own practices. Some excerpts from the interviews with the students have been integrated into the discussion in order to illustrate the similarities and differences between lecturers and international students in relation to strategies for developing academic writing within their discipline.

The lecturers selected for the study are those who lectured in the disciplines of Education and Economics. A summary of their profiles is presented in the table below.

Table 1
Profiles of Academic Staff

Name	Gender	Discipline	Teaching Experience
Anna	Female	Education	13 years
Kevin	Male	Education	16 years
Lisa	Female	Economics	16 years
Andy	Male	Economics	Over 16 years

Of the four lecturers involved in this study, Kevin, Anna and Andy were Australian, and Lisa migrated to Australia from Europe a couple of years before the interview took place. Each lecturer was invited to partake in two interviews. The focus of the first interview was to discuss the requirements for the first assignment and the strategies the lecturers had used to support the international students in their classes. The second interview was conducted after the first assignment had been assessed and returned to the students. The second interview explored the lecturer's perceptions of the students' development of their academic writing skills and reflected on the strategies they believed had supported the students when completing the first assignment in their course. In relation to positioning theory, the interviews were analyzed to explore the positioning of the lecturers regarding their rights and responsibilities within the institutional practices of their university.

The student participants were pursuing Masters of Education or Masters of Economics. They had volunteered to participate in the study and were willing to reflect on their experiences of writing their first text at the Australian university and how they developed their understandings of academic writing. There were two rounds of interviews with the students. In reference to positioning theory, data from the first interview was used to analyze the students' positioning after they had completed their first assignment, and the second interview considered their positions in relation to developing academic writing after they had completed their first semester at an Australian university. The student profiles are summarized below:

Table 2
Profiles of International Students

Name	National Background	Gender	Discipline
Xuân	Vietnamese	Female	Education
Wang	Chinese	Female	Education
Binh	Vietnamese	Female	Education
Lin	Chinese	Female	Education
Hao	Chinese	Female	Economics
Ying	Chinese	Female	Economics
Vỹ	Vietnamese	Female	Economics

All the interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Each interview was analyzed using positioning theory categories. A profile of each of the interviewees was developed that mapped their positions in relation to the strategies they used to develop the academic writing skills of international students. In particular, the analysis included how the interviewees supported and justified the positions they adopted in relation to their rights and responsibilities within the institutional practices of the university.

Strategies for Developing Academic Writing

This section explores the approaches that the four lecturers, Anna, Kevin, Lisa and Andy, adopted in their attempts to support international students in dealing with the written assignments in their course and the tensions they may have experienced in providing for the needs of international students. International students' views on the support provided by the lecturers are also integrated into the analysis. The analysis reveals that support provision for students' written assignments is an individual endeavor, as lecturers do not seek assistance from their colleagues and do use different strategies to support their students. It also highlights the lack of course planning related to integrating disciplinary and language learning or guidelines that can inform lecturers' practices.

Explain the Criteria and Expectations Explicitly

The four lecturers in this study indicated that they attempted to support international students enrolled in their subject by clearly communicating the requirements for academic writing. Anna, for example, tried to make her expectations clear by giving the students a criteria sheet for each assignment and explaining the criteria so that the students were clear about what was expected of them:

I think my students understand my expectations very clearly because every assignment that I give has a criteria sheet. The things that I am looking for are clarity of topic question, understanding of terms, and relations to other areas of language acquisition theory, coverage and relevance of literature to the topic, ability to evaluate current state of knowledge, relevant to the question topic, identification of contradictions, gaps needing further research.

Kevin also conveyed expectations of academic writing rather than taking for granted that students would understand how to write assignments for the course:

I don't assume the students know how to do it. I need to show them and they need to be taught ... Sometimes it's not clear what teachers want. We use a kind of shorthand like blah blah blah discuss, but what does that mean? What do we actually expect the students to do when we say 'here's the statement, discuss'? We often take it for granted that the students will understand. So first of all, make it clear what you expect of them.

Like other lecturers involved in this study, Lisa and

Andy included the assessment criteria for student writing in the course outline as a way of assisting students in understanding early in the semester the tasks they are required to complete and how to embark on those tasks. Andy said, "I tell everybody what I want before they do their assignment. That way they know what I expect from them." Lisa elaborated on her effort:

First of all, in the course outline, make your expectations clear. In my course outline, I usually indicate different criteria I use to evaluate them and in my feedback to the students when I mark the students' assignments, and I mark them based on these individual criteria, some of them are general... So I think what is important is to have a consistency between what is indicated in the course outline and what you use as a marking guideline.

Though all lecturers involved in the study stated that they tried to provide students with detailed instructions about how to deal with their written assignments, the student in the study indicated that they struggled to understand what was required. The students interviewed also revealed that sometimes they did not find the writing guidelines helpful since these instructions focus more on technical aspects rather than issues of content, which they found more challenging. Students also expressed a wish to be provided with more detailed explanations about writing specific assignments:

Ying: I like the lecturer to give the topics and the guidelines at the beginning of the semester.

Hao: Yes, maybe the lecturers think that we should know but actually we don't know. Maybe the local students know but at least I don't know. So I hope the lecturers will explain the essay [requirements] in detail because sometimes they just mention "Ah, this is the essay topic, you write this blah blah blah"... that finishes but you know when you write the essay, you will have a lot of problems and you have to ask again.

Xuân presented a different case in which the students were indeed provided with the assessment criteria but still felt unclear about what was expected of them:

So this [assessment criteria] is quite general. For example, clarity of topic or questions or understanding of terms means how to make it clear and understanding of each term like, well, you understand but how do you show the lecturer that you understand? With the literature review, I think that I have covered all the things. For example, I

can find some books that talk about the topic but are they enough? So I mean this is very general.

In Xuân's opinion, the criteria seemed to be clear on the surface, as both the content and form that students were expected to demonstrate were mentioned. Yet, Xuân wondered about the particular ways to make the topic clear and to show her understanding of the questions and what constituted relevant literature. Thus, for her, these criteria remained ambiguous, and she had to struggle to make sense of what they actually meant. It would appear from Xuân's account that the criteria may appear clear to the lecturers who develop them, but she remained unsure of how to demonstrate these criteria in her writing.

Her comments were insightful since they highlighted the need to unpack the meanings of such terms as "clarity of topic or questions," "understandings of terms," or "coverage and relevance of literature." In short, the lecturers might think they communicate their expectations of student academic writing clearly by providing them with the assessment criteria, but the students themselves actually desire far more specific explanations about the constructs of "good writing" addressed in the criteria. In terms of positioning theory, the lectures self-position as having clearly explained the criteria for assessment. However, the students self-position as not being confident about understanding the criteria and thereby other-positioned the lecturers as the ones who should explain how to demonstrate the criteria in their assignments.

Giving Students Assignments Early in the Semester

Only one of the lecturers involved in the study mentioned setting assignments early in the semester in order to give students feedback. Lisa, a lecturer in Economics, stated that this strategy assisted students in her course in becoming familiar with the academic writing expectations. She revealed:

I think what is useful is to get the students used to you by giving them the assignment on week four or week five, mark the assignment and give it back to them within one or two weeks at the most ... to give feedback before they do the second assignment. That's the only way they can learn, and if you have the assignment later on in the semester, they can't improve; they don't have the chance to improve.

According to Lisa, engaging students in the real practice of academic writing for their subject and giving them comments on their writing in the early weeks of the semester helps them to learn about what they are expected to do. This strategy of supporting students seemed beneficial since it required them to become

actively involved in familiarizing themselves with the disciplinary practice in their course early in the semester, while learning from timely feedback improves their next assignments. In talking about her teaching practice, Lisa self-positioned as a well-intentioned lecturer who is dedicated in supporting students to understand academic expectations and improve their writing.

With regard to the form of feedback provided, Lisa indicated that she tended to combine both oral and written comments on student written assignments:

I indicate whether they perform well enough on these criteria, and then they will get a bit of verbal feedback about the things they have done well or not so well so they can improve... I think it's important to have structured feedback so they know which aspects of the assignment they will need to improve.

Lisa's strategy in supporting students to unpack disciplinary requirements matched with the expectations of the students involved in the study who wish to receive detailed comments from the lecturers on their early assignments so that they know how to work more effectively on later assignments. Xuân, for example, stressed that she found the lecturers' feedback on her essays very useful in helping her learn about what was expected so that she could improve in the following assignments. In her view, most of her lecturers were very keen to give specific comments about her writing. However, she recalled her disappointment with one of her lecturers:

The lecturer didn't put any comment, I got very good marks but I was so wondering whether she read it or not. I don't know why I get good marks, I don't know whether she read it or not (laugh). I think I should approach and ask her what are my good points and bad points of my essay but I didn't do that.

In a similar vein, Binh commented:

At least you have to show your students that you have read the assignment, if you just put tick tick tick tick, I can do that as well. We don't need that.

The above quotation indicated that though Xuân achieved a high result on that assignment, she felt dissatisfied with the lecturer for not commenting on her writing. Both students wished to learn about the lecturers' expectations through constructive feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their work. The students' accounts indicated that lecturers' feedback was significant in assisting students to develop their

understanding of academic writing within their discipline.

Collaborating with the LAS

Working with the LAS in assisting international students in their writing practices was a strategy adopted by two lecturers in this study, Anna and Andy. For example, Anna highlighted the significance of informing international students of the support services available for them. She tried to encourage her international students to participate in lunchtime seminars run by the Learning Skills Center and the orientation program run by the graduate school. In addition to this, she sought to work with the LAS in the following way:

The LAS has the written assignment scheme. In that scheme, the students put the assignment in for one of the tutors. They send me a piece of paper saying that the student has submitted the essay to them. The tutor works with the student on essay organization, coherence, syntactical things, and then the student has a few days to work on those before handing it to me. I publicize this service to all my students. It helps the international students to save face ... some of the students won't go and ask for help because they see it as a criticism of them.

Anna, like Andy, considered it important to encourage her international students to seek support for their academic writing from the LAS. Anna self-positioned as a lecturer who supported international students with their academic writing. She pointed out that asking international students to utilize the LAS programs might be a sensitive matter, as they may get the message that they are having academic problems and need support to 'fix' them. It can be associated with the fear of being considered weak academically in the eyes of their teacher. This resonates with Clegg et al.'s (2006) findings that, in the UK higher education system, despite lecturers' perceptions that 'they offer students opportunities for support, students do not take advantage of them' (p.101). LAS programs, which operate outside of disciplinary teaching and learning, may further diminish their relevance in terms of developing students' academic writing within their discipline (O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009).

Anna's other-positioning of her international students and their reaction to her advice on seeking support from the LAS may reflect a deep-seated assumption among lecturers and international students that academic support services are meant to remedy students' learning problems rather than to assist students with developing their learning skills or

capitalising their academic potential. Anna self-positioned as a lecturer who did not want to position international students as 'deficit' with their academic writing skills and therefore 'publicized' the services of the LAS to all her students. In so doing, she believed that the sense of losing face that some international students may associate with the use of such support services was minimized; she also felt that students should be encouraged to utilize the services that they actually pay for. The approach taken by Anna is supported by Clegg et al. (2006), who discuss the need to build a supportive learning environment for students through available strategies and resources within the university.

Andy, who is teaching in the Economics faculty, also referred students who he thought needed support with their English language skills to the LAS:

I urge people who I think need to go to the LAS to do so, and we have the orientation program for international students coming to the program, and we have people coming from the LAS to talk to them ... We tell students that the LAS would look at the written drafts [of their assignments] and discuss their work in terms of the structure and written expression.

The comments on support provision for international students by the lecturers in this study indicate that discipline-based lecturers used different approaches to collaborate with the LAS. While Anna favored the 'written assignment scheme' (as described above) and tried to publicly raise students' awareness of the support resources available for them, Andy emphasized a number of times the importance of the LAS to his students. Unlike Anna, who was cautious about the risk of causing individual students to lose face through classifying them as those who need help to 'fix' their problems, Andy tended to urge international students whom he identified as having weaknesses in English language and academic writing to seek help. Both approaches would be at the soft end of integrating academic and language learning in the sense that English language learning is still considered by the lecturers as occurring outside of the domain of the disciplinary teaching and learning.

The fact that only two of the lecturers emphasized the services of the LAS may indicate that the take-up of these services is left to the discretion of individual lecturers. This supports Arkoudis' (2008) argument that a more systematic approach is required for promoting the LAS across departments and faculties. The relationship between lecturers such as Andy and Anna and the LAS is one example of low-level integration of disciplinary and language learning and teaching. What appears to be lacking is a common

approach to collaborating systematically with academic advisors in supporting students develop their academic writing within the departments to which the lecturers belong.

Lecturers' Challenges in Developing Academic Writing of International Students

The lecturers struggled in their role of assisting international students with academic writing. While they all acknowledged that it was important to offer students assistance in the form of criteria sheets, they also indicated that they found it challenging to give advice to students on academic writing, and they self-positioned themselves as unclear about what that advice should be. This section highlights the contested nature of academic writing that can result in students receiving conflicting information.

Kevin was thoughtful about his role in assessing students' essays:

I feel a bit uncomfortable about it [assessing students' work] after you have been through a process of drafting, redrafting and discussing. Sometimes I feel in a way I am kind of taking over from the student. I am taking away her autonomy. I find it difficult to know exactly how much guidance to give because you want to guide, you want to lead, but you don't want to dominate.

In the above quote, Kevin described his role as someone who often decided on the assignment question and criteria, guided students' writing, and finally evaluated students' essays. Kevin's self-positioning appeared to portray the institutional structure as an intellectual circle whereby students' writing practices were largely regulated by the lecturers who embodied that structure. Kevin indicated that there was too much control over students' practice of academic writing and thus insufficient space for students' autonomy. He was concerned about how to offer guidance to students in a meaningful way without dominating and limiting their creativeness in writing. By referring to the assumptions about lecturers' and students' skills, he seemed to imply that he should not go beyond the circle and the routines set in the university context. In sum, according to positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), Kevin self-positioned as a lecturer who was active in critically reflecting on his role but was still subject to the conventional practices of his institution. However, his ways of questioning the current academic pedagogy and his own practice signalled the potential to transform the institutional practices.

Another challenge in supporting student academic writing is highlighted by Andy. Despite his own efforts in accommodating students' needs, Andy revealed that

there was an absence of common criteria for evaluating student writing in his discipline:

Another impression is that some of my colleagues would put somebody to a fail grade if their writing has mechanical mistakes, like spelling or grammar, so I am one of the softer people... At the moment, there is no common rule, and I suppose one reason for that is there are strong differences of opinions among the lecturers about what the rules should be, and we face the difficulties of academic freedom. People feel that they have great autonomy not only on what they teach and how they teach but on the assessment process as well.

In Andy's view, lecturers in his discipline worked as individuals in setting out the guidelines for assessing student writing. He emphasized that this practice has led to variations in his expectations. For example, while he did not place much emphasis on students' language skills in his assessment, some of his colleagues might fail students because of what he referred to as 'mechanical mistakes.' In light of positioning theory, Andy self-positions as being more understanding of international students' struggles and other-positions his colleagues as possibly less understanding when assessing international students' academic writing skills. While he encouraged students to draw on their own experience in disciplinary writing, other lecturers might expect students just to employ materials from the academic discipline rather than from their personal experience.

Andy also pointed out two reasons why common assessment practices have not been established. First, it was hard to reach an agreement about the assessment criteria while their personal opinions differed. Second, lecturers could exercise great autonomy and freedom in their decisions concerning teaching in this discipline. Through illustrating the possible differences in the expectations of individual lecturers and the constraints in establishing constructs for evaluating student writing, Andy appeared to reproduce his disciplinary practices as shifting and contested. This would disadvantage international students in their attempts to interpret and accommodate what was expected of them.

Lisa also explained the challenges in articulating the writing requirements in her management discipline:

It's difficult to put that into words. Most lecturers know what is a good assignment when they see it, but it's very difficult to explain what makes a good assignment... I think in management, the skill of argument is even more important than in accounting and finance, and sometimes it makes it difficult for students because they think that these criteria are more subjective than the other ones. It's

not as subjective as they think, but it's more difficult for the lecturer to explain what a good argument is and why a particular articulation was wrong.

She raised the important point that most lecturers might know whether a particular assignment was satisfactory or not, but they might not be able to use concrete language to explore and explain to students what constitutes a 'good argument.' Her opinion was similar to that of Lea and Street (2000) in that lecturers might find it difficult to articulate the constructs of a good assignment.

In Lisa's view, the nature of the management discipline makes it challenging for the lecturers' expectations to be clearly communicated and articulated to students. This seems to disadvantage students, in particular international students, in their attempts to understand and accommodate what is expected of them in terms of academic writing. The analysis of students' accounts also revealed that in many cases they have to struggle to decode disciplinary ways of writing, since these were not explicitly expressed. In some cases, the students actively pose numerous questions about the guidelines for specific assignments. The students' initiative in asking questions and pointing out the ambiguity of the writing requirements in turn fostered conditions for their lecturers to revisit and decode what are often assumed to be disciplinary conventions. For example:

Xuân: I took two subjects this semester and for both the subjects the lecturers have to change the guideline... because it's not clear.

Bình: The lecturer had to change, had to improve the guideline [for writing the assignment] once. The first guideline is not very good and we asked a lot of questions about that and they have to reorganize the instruction. It's better.

In other words, the conventions associated with the disciplinary discourse are often not transparent, and students have to 'learn by doing rather than seeing the discourse unpacked' (Jones, 2001, p.186), or request that lecturers modify the guidelines and make them more explicit. From the above discussion, it appears that the lecturers in this study struggled with the challenge of clearly articulating what 'good writing' is in their discipline. It is difficult for them to explain to students how they can develop their academic writing if they are unclear about what constitutes academic writing in their discipline. This is reflected by the students' comments.

Conclusion

The analysis has revealed that academic writing within the disciplines is largely an individual endeavour

within higher education for both lecturers and their students. The lecturers position themselves as being aware of the needs of their international students, yet struggle with how to best assist them with their work. The main strategies that they use, such as outlining the criteria for assessment, seem to focus mainly on *what* students should be demonstrating in their academic writing, not on *how* they can actually develop these skills. In addition, the lecturers appear to struggle with explaining what good academic writing involves within their discipline, and there appears to be little discussion with colleagues that may lead to the development of shared understandings about this. In light of this, the students rely heavily on the comments received on their assignments to further develop their understandings of academic writing. Even when they received good results, as was the case with Xuân, lecturer feedback seemed to be important in further developing their understandings. In particular, there is a lack of a common effective approach to encourage students to utilize the LAS and to help faculty integrate language and academic support services in their teaching. This could be due to the university positioning the LAS as a service area, separate from the core business of disciplinary teaching and learning.

Given that there has been renewed interest globally in higher education about the English language development of international students, what can we learn from the above analysis that can assist in developing better practices around integrating disciplinary and language teaching? How can we assist the individual endeavours of lecturers as they support students with their academic writing? What we need is a whole institutional approach to this issue, the key components of which are outlined below:

1. Developing university strategic plans that incorporate academic language development under the broader area of internationalizing the curriculum. This would align academic language development with disciplinary learning and teaching.
2. Incorporating into the university's strategic plan responsibilities for course mapping, where course co-ordinators and lecturers identify appropriate subjects within the degree that will emphasize the learning and teaching of academic writing within the discipline.
3. Planning teaching, learning and assessments that incorporate the development of academic writing with collaboration from LAS staff. This could include discussion about appropriate models of LAS programs to support students to achieve the intended learning outcomes and developing shared understandings of the assessment criteria.

4. Raising student awareness and willingness to seek out support from the LAS by more closely aligning the assessment requirements with support that can be offered by LAS staff.

For many years, universities have struggled to address academic language development for international students. Clearly, we need to develop different approaches to addressing this issue that include a whole institutional approach to English language development, integrated within disciplinary teaching and learning.

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