

# **Supporting international students in academic writing**

## **Introduction**

The term "language support" can be misleading, as often it is really the skills to function in the Western academic mode that students have not yet acquired, in addition to needing support for poor English expression. Often international students are not prepared for the university expectation that they will be independent learners, as they come from academic cultures which are teacher-centred rather than student-centred. Students are often unfamiliar with the cultural conventions operating in Australian universities, such as the necessity for asking questions and the need for critical appraisal of the writing of others.

As a result, international students often experience a kind of academic culture shock. This can manifest itself in a number of areas: for example, in an inability to work out what is relevant, when reading to extract information from texts, or when writing in response to a question; difficulty in structuring written material, when writing on a particular theme, or being unfamiliar with the need to reference the ideas of others and the significance of plagiarism. The cumulative effect can be that students become hopelessly lost in a sea of written information, without possessing the tools to navigate their way through their course requirements. They often respond by presenting too much unfiltered information on a topic, rather than working within the boundaries of the question they are addressing in order to take a particular position or focusing on a specific theme.

## **English Language Support for International Students (ELSIS)**

The strategies ELSIS uses to provide language support for international students focus on the skills involved in constructing academic English. It should also be emphasised that many students from English speaking backgrounds have the same issues surrounding academic writing, because they have never been actively taught the skills involved. It appears that students are assumed to have acquired them by osmosis, before entering university, which is clearly rarely the case.

The support provided by ELSIS therefore is much more substantive than editing for grammatical or spelling mistakes. It occurs both at individual and group level, is multidisciplinary and involves helping students to understand how to organise texts and position themselves in their chosen area of study.

## **Working together to improve academic writing**

As Swales and Feake (1994, p. 3) point out, "academic writing is rhetorical" that is, when students construct a piece of academic text, they are required to take a position in regard to the question they are attempting to answer and to

make assumptions about what to say and how to say it. Students also need to become comfortable with using the academic conventions of their subject. A useful starting point for dealing with academic writing tasks is to conduct workshops with students on writing in progress, taking them through the various stages of constructing a piece of academic text. This process begins with analysing their assignment question. They are then encouraged to read and make notes, within the boundaries imposed by the question as their focus of enquiry. The skill of summarising relevant information is an important prelude to writing in one's own words and avoiding plagiarism. Once again it is apparent that these skills need to be actively taught, within contexts that are relevant to students' actual course work.

In some Schools, such as Business, Architecture and Health Science, ELSIS tutors are actively involved in teaching these skills within bridging courses, as well as in lectures and tutorials. This enables us to model the appropriate techniques relevant to the discourse of their subject. This inclusive approach is beneficial to students and staff, because both local and international students can contribute their voices to the discourse. This approach to language support sees the of academic writing as a complex socio-cognitive process as a process of construction, which is acquired in stages, rather than as a lack of ability to function in English, resulting from one's native language.

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