

**A sustainable approach to enhancing the experience of NESB (Non English Speaking Background) students in their first year at QUT, 2006/7**

**Karyn Gonano and Dr Karen Nelson**

### **1. Introduction**

This program had two aims.

1. To identify barriers to participation for NESB students in a First Year Unit in the Faculty of IT.
2. To develop a sustainable program to enhance NESB student participation and experiences in this unit. (The term experience is aligned with QUT FYE philosophy and includes engagement in learning, a sense of belonging and timely access to support. It includes all students entering QUT for the first time, whatever phase of study they are undertaking.)

The program focused on improving access and participation in learning activities in order to increase the success rate for NESB students in a unit requiring **teamwork**. By addressing communication barriers, providing practical strategies, and raising awareness of the broader social issues, this program also aimed to increase the awareness of all students of the benefits of a multi-cultural university experience.

### **2. Background**

Students from non English speaking backgrounds (NESBs) are faced with communication barriers that impact on their ability to engage in learning activities and to interact with the broader university community in order to develop a sense of belonging. The immediate consequences of these communication barriers tend to manifest as disengagement from peers and the learning community, non-participation in, or (worse) absence from classes, compromised ability to participate in team or project work, inaccurate perceptions of the value of a multi-cultural society and inequitable access to learning opportunities.

In the longer term, unaddressed or unresolved communication barriers may contribute to lower retention rates, poorer unit and overall performance, as measured by GPA (Grade Point Average), and separation of student cohorts into English and non English speaking groups. These situations do not support QUT's vision of a multicultural inclusive learning community.

To meet QUT's equity and social justice agenda, this project proposed to develop a structured support program to address the barriers to success for one of QUT's equity groups, and at the same time contribute to an increased respect for cultural diversity.

QUT students are required to understand the theories underpinning teamwork and employ these principles to actively participate in teamwork throughout their university experience. The access, participation and success of NESB students in team environments are impeded by written, oral and communication barriers. In the Faculty of IT, more than 8% of commencing and nearly 6% of all students (not including international students) identify as being from NESB backgrounds<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from Chair, FIT Equity Committee

In large classes requiring teamwork a structured and available support program is required to better prepare NESB students for, and support them throughout, their teamwork experiences. At the same time this program will raise the cultural and communication awareness of students from English speaking backgrounds and provide strategies for working in teams with NESB students.

### **3. Method**

The Program was developed by the Faculty of IT, Unit Coordinator in collaboration with the Language and Learning Adviser (International Student Services). The program was conducted over three semesters, namely Semester I and II 2006 and Semester 1 2007.

#### **3.1 Co-Curricula Intensive Support**

A Language and Learning Advisor (LLA) was introduced to the NESB students. These students were able to receive language support for written assignments and presentations and were given the opportunity to make as many one hour appointments as required, via the International Student Support receptionist.

Students were presented with a welcoming referral letter, and offered workshops on how to write reports and how to make effective presentations. However, only 3 of the 18 students identified regularly attended the workshops and 6-8 attended at least once.

The recommendation from staff and students was that the program could not be an *add-on*, and needed to be included and presented as a component of the unit.

#### **3.2 Embedded Support 1**

The LLA attended the IT lecture in Week 3 and was introduced to all students by the Unit Coordinator. The LLA spoke briefly and outlined their role. Tutors and the LLA then identified NESB students and others with barriers to participation and learning. These students were collectively called the KIN Group and a welcoming morning tea with NESB Higher Research students from the same faculty, further encouraged a sense of belonging. The LLA then

- attended all tutorial sessions working with each tutor and within groups containing NESB students
- assessed barriers to participation and learning. Refer Appendix 1
- monitored participation of KIN Group students
- assisted with interpretation of material
- supported NESB students to ask questions of their tutor; to seek understanding of what had been said; and to learn how to interrupt a 'superior' lecturer or tutor. This is difficult for students from particular cultural backgrounds.
- supported teams where NESB students were members. In this way, domestic students increased their awareness of cultural diversity and the difficulties faced when learning in a second (or third) language, and were advised on particular cultural beliefs and practices which explained students' participation behaviours in team activities. They were given strategies to increase the participation rate of NESB students in discussion activities and to better support NESB students.
- operated an open door policy where students could make an appointment directly with the LLA

This embedded approach to supporting NESB students was very effective and very labour intensive.

### **3.3 Embedded Support 2**

The Embedded Support program as offered in Semester II 2006 was repeated in Semester I 2007. However, the LLA did not attend a full group lecture in Week 3 (as recommended in the Interim Report) and was therefore not introduced as part of the teaching team. NESB students were identified by the Tutors and the LLA was introduced to each tutorial group during Week 5.

The LLA spoke with each NESB student, approximately 16. Two of these students were repeating. They did not participate in the KIN group or seek assistance outside the tutorial sessions. Neither was in attendance in the tutorial session, Semester I 2007, when the LLA introduced the support services, and how it can function with the LLA participating in tutorials. Each NESB student received the LLA's contact details and the offer of an open door policy. That is, students did not need to book an appointment. Each team with NESB participants was advised of the language and learning support available to them such as a team practice for their presentation.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Co-curricula**

The LLA was presented as an additional service offered to international and NESB students. Students did not identify the LLA and or this service as a part of their unit and came to perceive it as difficult to access.

### **4.2 Embedded Support 1**

Language and learning support was embedded in the tutorial session with the LLA introduced as a member of the teaching team. By attending tutorial sessions regularly the LLA was perceived by students to be *on hand* when they needed language, learning and cultural support.

This inclusive approach enabled students to immediately address problems and difficulties in a practical manner. The benefits were immediate.

The three Tutors, as well as students were very willing to have the support of the LLA, to have them attend and actively participate in tutorial sessions and activities. Students were again able to perceive the LLA as a member of the teaching team.

Students (12 of 14 NESB + 2 domestic with learning issues from a different equity group + 1 domestic at risk student) who utilized the service, both during tutorials and via additional one-on-one (assignments) or team appointments (team presentation) achieved passing grades.

### **4.3 Embedded Support 2**

The total number of students participating in the course was double the previous semester, approximately 200 to 400 though the number of NESB students remained approximately the same at 18.

The number of Tutors increased to 9 this semester and 6 of these taught only 1 or 2 tutorials. Some tutors were new to the unit.

The Unit Coordinator was new and had been a tutor the previous semester.

QUT's equity and social justice agenda, the initiative of this project, was embedded, but not promoted explicitly as a key principle in this phase as had been the case previously.

The overwhelming sense, from both Tutors and students was that the LLA and associated support services was an additional service for which they could see no immediate need. Students received a follow-up email highlighting again the services available.

Only 1 NESB student contacted the LLA for support which was content related. This student was referred on to the Tutor who was able to meet the student's needs. The student was concerned whether the tutor was 'as friendly' as the LLA, highlighting the need for a supportive learning environment.

The following reasons identify, in part, why the embedded support program was less effective in Phase 3, in terms of student's seeking support and or making appointments.

- The overall philosophy of equity and inclusion was not as evident due to the change in Unit Coordinator and the introduction of 5 new tutors
2. The LLA was introduced in Week 5 and not to the student cohort as a whole. That is, too late in the semester for students to consider the LLA a component of the teaching team and the program a part of the unit.

## 5. Recommendations

A sustainable approach to enhancing the experience of NESB students, that is accessible, inclusive, equitable and time effective, includes the following recommendations:

1. Training Tutors to better support NESB students in the classroom. While new Tutors participate in the *Train the Tutor* program (QUT TALLS), all Tutors would benefit from a Cultural Awareness Training Program which highlights:
  - an awareness of culture and the cultural background of international students attending QUT
  - an awareness of cultural, and language and learning needs of international students
  - an awareness of cultural, and language and learning needs of students who are registered as domestic students but have English as their second language
  - effective communication skills associated with successful global practice
  - how to use international examples, for example from the students' culture
  - the identification of different learning styles of international and NESB students using case studies
  - strategies for including NESB students in discussions and activities for active learning
  - questioning techniques for eliciting information/ideas from NESB students
  - strategies for *checking for understanding* to ensure that deep learning is taking place in their classroom
2. Introduce the QUT Equity philosophy (Refer Appendix 2)  
Introduce the QUT Equity Services available to ALL students.  
Introduce the LLA as a member of the Unit Teaching Team at the beginning of the semester. This will enable students to identify appropriate equity and support services and their 'key' people. This will also enable students and Tutors to respond positively to this level of support.

3. Develop a mentoring program. Identify students in the same unit who are native English speakers and are willing to mentor an NESB student. The guidelines for this program include a scenario based session whereby native English speaking students explore solutions for specific NESB questions. This program is conducted jointly by QUT Counselling and International Student Services.

## **5. Conclusion**

Two strategies were designed and trialled to provide a sustainable program which enhanced NESB student experiences in their first year at QUT.

It was determined from the trial conducted over three semesters that an embedded support program must be provided that incorporates:

- Curriculum development based on QUT equity principles
- Training the Tutor including Cultural Awareness Training
- Student Mentor program, and
- Appropriate Language and Learning support, where required.

The Equity – fair go for all poster needs to preface the Unit and be introduced to students as the basis of the Unit and its activities.

Training the Tutor Program which highlights cultural awareness and the specific language and learning needs of QUT international and NESB students needs to be implemented. This would provide specific skills and practical strategies for Tutors to address communication barriers which will enhance the learning experience of NESB students.

In order to develop an equitable, flexible and creative university culture a mentoring program can be implemented within the unit between native and non native speakers of English.

A Language and Learning Adviser is required to address the language and learning needs of NESB students which facilitates a culture of independent learning and inclusivity. The Adviser needs to be introduced to students at the commencement of the unit and as part of the Unit's teaching team so that all students readily identify this support which meets the QUT culture of equity.

## **Appendix 1 *Initial Assessment of Barriers to Participation and Learning***

Barriers to Participation were defined by the students':

- Communication skills and not just the macro skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening
- Willingness and confidence to use English as their second or third (or more) language
- Cultural understanding of the academic processes at QUT
- Understanding of the need to actively participate in the lecture and tutorial.

Barriers were identified through:

### 1. Observation

Determined by a student's willingness to

- Speak and become involved in tutorial discussions
- Ask questions
- Ask questions and seek clarification when information was not clear or understood
- Interact with Tutor / Lecturer in an Australian / QUT educational context
- Interact with colleagues, both within the team and tutorial
- Identify why they may not be understood by others and, have the skills and confidence to check for understanding; and to present to be understood
- Persevere

### 2. Interview

This was an informal conversation conducted during the tutorial to identify the level of language and communication skills through

- Interpersonal communication skills
- Recount of learning processes to date
- Difficulties encountered in learning processes to date

### 3. Formative Feedback

Provided on written work students completed in the first two tutorials

It was evident that many NESB students, at the beginning of the semester, had not fully developed the communicative competence to participate actively in the IT Professional Studies unit. However, those students who did work with and use the LLA services did develop their competencies and increase their learning opportunities. This is based on the pass rate successes of Semester II 2006.

## Appendix 2

# Equity = fair go for all

**QUT is committed to providing everyone the opportunity to reach their potential**

### Services for students

- Scholarships and financial assistance for low-income students ([www.scholarships.qut.com](http://www.scholarships.qut.com))
- Disability Services for students with temporary or permanent disabilities ([www.equity.qut.edu.au/disability](http://www.equity.qut.edu.au/disability))
- Language and learning support for students of non English-speaking backgrounds ([www.issupport.qut.edu.au](http://www.issupport.qut.edu.au))
- An inclusive environment free from discrimination and harassment ([www.equity.qut.edu.au/programs/discrimination](http://www.equity.qut.edu.au/programs/discrimination))
- Advice and confidential counselling ([www.counselling.qut.edu.au](http://www.counselling.qut.edu.au) or [www.issupport.qut.edu.au](http://www.issupport.qut.edu.au))
- Elite Athlete Program  
[www.guildonline.net/page.asp?name=Elite\\_Student\\_Athletes](http://www.guildonline.net/page.asp?name=Elite_Student_Athletes)
- Specific Faculty Equity Contact .....