

International students: Sojourners or immigrants? A changing role for tertiary learning advisors

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Abstract

Reforms to Australia's skilled migration policy since 1999 have led to a marked increase in the proportion of the skilled migration intake coming from former international students, in particular from students graduating from accounting programmes. Birrell (2009) indicated that many of these former students who obtained permanent residence visas by this route in 2005-06 had not achieved a proficiency level in English required for employment as professionals. This paper describes how the transformations in the migration context and the accompanying transformations in the aims and desires of international students have led to transformations in the role of tertiary learning advisors in one context in Australia.

Introduction

Since 1999, there have been a series of changes to Australia's skilled migration policy that have encouraged international students who have completed higher education courses in occupational areas in which there is a skills shortage in Australia to apply for permanent residence. This transformation in Australia's migration policy has resulted in two other sorts of transformation: a transformation in the aims and desires of some international students and a transformation in the role of tertiary learning advisors whose role it is to assist these students achieve their goals. This paper outlines these migration policy changes, some of the outcomes of the changes and how one faculty in one Australian university is responding.

Transformations in the migration context

From the mid-1990s Australia's immigration programme shifted in emphasis from family reunion and humanitarian streams to a focus on skilled migration and, since 1999, international students have been favoured over other applicants in the point system used to evaluate skilled migration applications. In 2001 a new visa category was introduced specifically for applicants with Australian tertiary qualifications, which enabled recent graduates to apply for temporary or permanent residence visas

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‘onshore’. The results of these visa changes have had significant effects on enrolments in Australian universities. Not only has there been a marked growth in the total number of enrolments, but also a shift towards fields of study related to the list of ‘occupations in demand’. Prominent amongst these occupations in demand is that of accounting and, in 2003-2004, for example, international students enrolling in accounting courses made up 65% of all students commencing accounting courses at postgraduate level (Birrell & Rapson, 2005). In 2003-04, the onshore visa category enabled 2,500 international students who had recently graduated with accounting degrees to obtain permanent residence visas (Birrell & Rapson, 2005). In 2004-05, the figure was 4,010 (Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson, 2006) and in 2005-06, it had grown to 6,595 (Birrell, 2006).

However, this shift in focus in the immigration programme towards skilled immigration and the granting of permanent residence to those with Australian tertiary qualifications, has not produced entirely expected outcomes. Graduation from an Australian university with academic qualifications in an occupational area in demand, has not automatically ensured employability. When these onshore visas were first introduced, it was assumed a degree from an Australian university would imply a certain level of proficiency in English. It turned out, however, that this was not always the case and in 2004 a new requirement was introduced that visa applicants must achieve a minimum band of 6.0 in the General Module of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test. In 2005-06, approximately a third of the applicants for onshore visas failed to reach this level of proficiency and for Chinese applicants, who constituted the majority of the applicants, the percentage failing to reach the required level was 43% (Birrell, 2006). When these figures were publicised a media sensation ensued and universities in Australia have subsequently become acutely aware of the need to enhance international students’ proficiency in English.

One specific outcome of the attention given to the inadequate English language proficiency of applicants for permanent residency was the creation, in September 2007, of a new permanent residence visa category with increased English language proficiency requirements. Applicants in the age bracket 19-29, with Australian qualifications obtained in a course of at least two years’ duration in an occupational area that is in the list of occupations in demand and who obtain a band level of at least 7.0 in each component of the General Module of the IELTS test can now meet the requirements for a permanent residence visa even though they might have no work experience in the occupation in demand.

Transformations in the aims and desires of international students

Prior to 1999 international students upon graduation from Australian universities had to return to their home countries. This was a requirement of their student visas. They may at some stage then apply for a migration visa to return to Australia to work and live, but it was reasonable for any lecturer teaching or assisting these students to assume that the students were seeking Australian qualifications that they would use to gain employment in their home country. The availability of temporary and permanent

residence visas for Australian graduates applying on shore has changed that. Now, many international students in Australia are future migrants. Robertson (2006) notes their uniqueness in this respect:

Their period of temporary residence in Australia as students acts a transitional stage, during which decisions to stay or motivations behind these decisions may alter or develop considerably. The transitory phase of study also constitutes a 'double adaption' whereby individuals undergo two adjustments, first as a student at a foreign university and then as a permanent migrant [*sic*]. The effect of this two-phase transition into Australian society may have a distinct affect on their experiences and the way in which they position themselves as migrants. Secondly, although they will be highly familiar with Australian life and culture due to their exposure during their period of study, they would also have migrated as adults and probably maintain close familial, friendship or organisational ties with their country of origin (Robertson, 2006, p. 4).

Robertson raises interesting questions about issues of belonging, mobility, citizenship and permanence relating to these students who are transitioning to migrants and perhaps to global professionals with a transnational sense of belonging. It is important for tertiary learning advisors and academic language lecturers working with these students to understand the complexity of their aims and desires: aims and desires that go beyond success in academic study, to that of reaching a high level of proficiency in English and an understanding of Australian workplace culture as well as world knowledge that will enhance their employability in a wide range of contexts. Yet little research has been reported to date that considers this category of student as distinct from international students who are educational 'sojourners' planning to return to their home countries on completion of their studies.

Transformations in the role of tertiary learning advisors

The inadequate English language proficiency of many university graduates and the implications made clear in the media that universities were failing in one of their assumed roles has led to an increased focus on communication skills in Australian universities. At a national level, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWRA) has funded a project to develop a set of good practice principles for English language competence in academic studies. Courses that focus on communication, for example, Engineering Communication, Communication for IT Professionals, are becoming more common either as electives or core subjects within degree programmes.

In 2008 the Graduate School of Business at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), aware of the interest that this new skilled migration visa sub-class was attracting among international students, introduced a Masters in Professional 'Accounting (MPA) Extended' specifically intended for international students. This degree programme would provide students with academic qualifications in accounting

– one of the occupations in demand; it would provide them with Australian qualifications in a course of two years duration, and it would provide them adequate opportunity to improve their proficiency in English and therefore meet the IELTS requirement.

The UTS Handbook describes the MPA Extended as follows:

The Masters of Professional Accounting Extended is designed to provide non-accounting graduates with the necessary skills and knowledge required for a career in professional accounting. The completion of the course satisfies the academic requirements for membership to CPA Australian and the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Australia (ICAA) (University of Technology Sydney, 2008).

The degree comprises sixteen subjects: twelve are accounting, finance, legal or economics subjects and four are ‘communication’ subjects. The purpose of the communication subjects is described in the Handbook as being to ‘enhance the English language skills of non-accounting graduates who want professional accreditation so as to improve their prospects of gaining accounting employment’.

The UTS Graduate School of Business asked the university’s academic language and learning centre to design and deliver these four ‘communication’ subjects. In Australia, tertiary academic language and learning advisors have positioned themselves as advisors and lecturers whose core expertise is in developing the ‘academic’ language and learning skills of students in order that the students can meet the requirements of their academic programme. The Association for Academic Language and Learning describes it thus:

Academic Language and Learning staff work with students, both local and international, at every level from first year through postgraduate. They recognise that the challenges of moving through higher education are not remedial, but ones that every student faces: understanding the cultures of enquiry in academic disciplines, and developing control of their discourses (AALL, 2008).

There has been a conscious effort to distinguish the work academic language and learning lecturers do from that of ‘general’ English teachers, of study skills advisors and of remedial teachers. The request from the Graduate School of Business, however, was for academic language and learning advisors to develop subjects that would not only meet the ‘academic’ language and learning needs of the students, but also to develop subjects that would prepare them for the professional workplace as well as to prepare the students for achieving a particular English language proficiency level in a standardised English language proficiency test. While much time and effort had been spent in defining the core role of academic language and learning advisors as one that supports students in ‘academic’ contexts, the transformed context was asking that the role be greatly expanded.

According to research undertaken by Melles, Millar, Morton and Fegan (2005) around half of Australia's universities were offering some form of English as a Second Language (ESL) courses for credit in 2002-03. Most were not discipline specific, although they may have been content based. However, the more typical models of support offered by tertiary academic language and learning advisors in Australia are still one-to-one consultations, non-credit workshops or (increasingly) working collaboratively with disciplinary staff (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007). It has been external factors, in the case discussed here the request from the Graduate School of Business at UTS, which are influencing the prioritising of the credit subject model over other possible models of in-course support. Any future research into the effectiveness of these subjects will need not only to consider whether the students enrolled in the subjects are assisted in 'understanding the cultures of enquiry in academic disciplines, and developing control of their discourses' but also meeting immigration requirements and being successfully employed and settled in Australia.

Communication skills in the Masters of Professional Accounting

The task then of developing communication subjects for this group of students was a complex one – and one that some tertiary academic language and learning advisors would argue did not fall in the ambit of academic language and learning advising. Nevertheless, the transformed context did result in UTS academic language and learning advisors accepting a transformation of roles. There follows below a description of the four subjects that were developed to meet the aims and desires of students who would transition to migrants and, in all likelihood, global professionals who are 'at home' in at least two countries.

All students enrolling in the MPA Extended are required to enrol in a core subject named, perhaps not entirely aptly, 'Business Communication Skills'. This subject is compulsory and taken by students in their first semester. As all students in the programme are required to pass 'Business Communication Skills', the skills focus of this subject is that which academic language and learning advisors see as central to their expertise: helping the students to develop an academic voice and to meet the language requirements of the other subjects they are studying. While some students are much more proficient in English than others, all can benefit from practice in paraphrasing, summarising and referencing correctly; in thinking critically; in working in groups; in the discussion of issues and the oral presentation of research findings. Based on the belief that language skills are most effectively acquired when used in meaningful exchange, a theme for the subject was selected that is important for the understanding of business principles in Australia today, but which could be new for some of the students enrolled in the programme: corporate social responsibility.

The other three communication subjects in the MPA Extended are electives and each is focused on one of the purposes for which the students need to improve their communication skills. 'English for Accounting Studies' has been designed to give additional English language development support for those students whose English is

identified as inadequate as a result of their performance in ‘Business Communication’ Skills. There is a review of the skills practised in ‘Business Communication Skills’, but a greater focus is given to improving speaking skills in informal situations and to acceptable usage of English in report writing. The theme for this subject is cross-cultural communication. For those students who see themselves becoming residents of Australia or becoming global professionals whose existence is permanently transnational, greater cross-cultural awareness is an essential attribute.

‘Workplace Communications’, as the name suggests, is designed to enable students to understand the culture of the accounting workplace in Australia, to identify work opportunities, to effectively market themselves to appropriate employers and to develop professional skills and behaviours sought by employers that enable students to transition effectively into the accounting workplace. This subject has been developed by academic language and learning advisors with advice and input from the UTS Careers Service.

‘English for Professional Purposes’ is the subject designed to enable students to meet what for many is their most pressing purpose – to achieve the desired results in the IELTS test. This subject is designed to enable students to have as many opportunities as possible to use English in a range of contexts: academic and social as well as professional so that they develop their ability to use English with flexibility and precision with an awareness of what is appropriate for any given context. The subject is also designed to give students preparation and practice for the Cambridge ESOL Examinations ‘International Certificate in Financial English’ should they choose to sit for this test as well.

The task of developing these subjects has been an interesting one for the learning advisors, but also a challenging one. Discipline lecturers within the Faculty of Business were willing and interested to collaborate in initial course design. Their major concern, however, was that the English language proficiency of the students improve. For learning advisors, an understanding that language and content do not exist independently of each other is a given. This understanding is not, however, always shared by academics whose formation has been in non-linguistic disciplines. Thus far, therefore, the onus has been on the learning advisors developing the subjects to gain a more in-depth knowledge of course content and assessment in the accounting and other business subjects the students are studying. This greater understanding has enhanced the learning advisors’ capacity to contribute to the other modes of support they provide such as the more traditional one-to-one consultations and non-credit workshops. While the ideal arrangement might be team teaching of these business communication subjects with discipline staff and a mutual sharing of expertise, this ideal is yet to be realised. The primary role the learning advisor has been asked to play is that of the English language expert who can equip the students not only to meet the language requirements of their academic programme, but also to meet language requirements external to that programme – requirements defined by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Conclusion

This paper has considered three transformations: the transformation in the migration context in Australia; the transformation in the aims and aspirations of many of the international students coming to Australia, and the accompanying transformation of the roles of academic language and learning advisors working with these students. As academic language and learning advisors strive to establish a particular identity and define their core role, new demands are placed on them. Many international students in the 21st century are not simply educational sojourners, but potential migrants who require not only support in adjusting to the academic demands of their study programmes, but support in preparing for employment and settlement in the country to which they have come initially as students. Attention both within Australian universities and within the media to a lack of satisfactory English language proficiency of some of these potential migrants is likely to lead to an increased demand for learning advisors to focus on developing students' English language proficiency and communication skills that prepare them for the Australian workplace. ESL and communication skills for credit subjects offered within the context of professional degrees are likely to increase. The content of these subjects will not only aim to develop the communication skills students require for academic success at university but also for employment and life as professionals in Australia after graduation.

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