# Internationalisation of the Curriculum and Support for International Students

| Title of Case Study: | EAP: Not just English for Academic Purposes but also Epistemologically Appropriate Practice |
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**Institution and initiating department/faculty:**

Northampton Business School, The University of Northampton

**Departments/faculties in which initiative implemented/to be implemented:**

As above

| Key Contact: | Others involved: |
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| **Name:**   Dave Burnapp<br>**Address:**<br>Northampton Business School<br>Park Campus<br>Boughton Green Road<br>Northampton<br>NN2 7AL<br><br><br>Tel:     01604 892182<br>Email: Dave.burnapp@northampton.ac.uk | Name:<br><br>Tel:<br><br>Email:<br><br>Name:<br>Tel:<br>Email<br><br>Name<br>Tel:<br>Email |

**Abstract**

This case-study describes the development and delivery of a pre-sessional course for international students which goes beyond the more usual English for Academic Purposes (EAP) concerns of register, genres, and study skills, by adding overt exploration of the underpinning beliefs of UK academics (in this case in a Business School) concerning what constitutes learning and how knowledge should be constructed. It is based on an assumption that teaching *how* to do things (e.g. seminar presentations or literature reviews) without addressing *why* these language behaviours take the forms they do, is to teach obedience rather than understanding.

**Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative**

As with many other institutions this university has recently seen a rapid increase in the number of international students, in particular those entering either top-up degrees or directly entering Masters courses which, unlike first year undergraduate courses, leave no leeway for initial errors during adaptation. The EAP staff of the university began to receive an increasing number of requests for help concerning what were deemed to be language difficulties. Deeper investigations, however, led to the conclusion that these linguistic difficulties – which do indeed exist – are compounded by students' unfamiliarity with some of the demands placed on them, and a genuine confusion about the value, purpose, and forms of the expected, accepted, and respected behaviours in this setting.

It was therefore decided to design an induction course which taught not just the required behaviours – seminar discussion skills for example – but to link these to an overt exploration of the theories of knowledge prevalent in the Business School: so, as an example, in the case of seminars this would require investigating theories concerning the social construction of knowledge.

This project therefore involved researching what were the epistemological assumptions held within the business school, devising teaching materials to reveal these to new international students, then assessing the outcomes of the course.

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**Description of activity or initiative**

The aim of the course is to familiarise international students, of both undergraduate and taught Masters courses, with the accepted theories of knowledge creation within a Business School; to practice the activities which emerge from these assumptions (both whilst learning and in assessments); and to rehearse the language behaviours necessary for these activities.

The course has been taught for three years now with amendments made for each delivery in the light of experience gained.

The research into the expectations concerning how knowledge should be created (i.e. the epistemology) within the Business School involved interviewing tutors, experienced international students, and the faculty librarians; it also employed documentary analysis of assignment instructions, module guides, and QAA subject benchmarking statements; and these led to follow-up investigations into learning theories which the earlier investigations had referred to either directly or by implication. A brief inventory of these expectations includes: Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning objectives; Kolb's (1984) description of learning styles; various theories concerning the social construction of knowledge (Berger & Luckman, 1966); and a variety of educational approaches requiring that learning should be autonomous, should be reflective, and – perhaps particularly important in Business Schools – should link theory to application.

The creation of teaching materials around these diverse demands employed approaches taken from intercultural training courses (Landis et al 2004), which recognise that transitions which involve identifying and amending assumptions which may previously have been unanalysed – and which link private views of one's own identity to shared cultural values – require observation, experimentation, reflection, and conceptualisation. These techniques are themselves based on Kolb's (1984) learning styles, so the course itself is both about and is an example of the target epistemology.

In brief, the learning theories are introduced in a 'culture' module which introduces the concepts in turn (and which utilises videoed descriptions from experienced students describing their own coming to terms with, say, keeping reflective portfolios); the language requirements associated with the concepts are introduced in a 'language' module (for example exploring subjective writing styles in connection to reflective learning, and discussion skills in connection with social construction of knowledge); and these are then experimented with in the 'academic' module which mimics a degree course module on the topic of Third World Development including seminars, lectures, presentations, groups work and so on.

The course is taught over four weeks, involving 20 hours of contact time per week, as well as directed activities involving both group and individual work.

**Evaluative comments**

Various methods of evaluation have been employed using both quantitative and qualitative methods (this project was the basis of the author's Doctorate thesis).

**Qualitative.**

Throughout the course the students are asked to keep a portfolio (this itself is an example of an increasingly common type of assessment, based on theories of learning being about change and reflection, and which demands a subjective language style in direct contrast to the assumption of many EAP courses that academic writing is necessarily objective). These portfolios – with the students' informed consent – were analysed to access the students' self assessment. The following example is particularly eloquent but is representative of many others:

> At the beginning, I had no any idea about how to structure the presentation, and I was not sure about if we could work it out. But in the process, I found out every member in the group contributed a little bit, this made the work easier and more interesting, just like many calm streams flowed together and become one larger noisy river. Discussion is really a great method to learn, it makes students enjoy learning, it also gives students a chance to communicate, organise and cooperate. All these skills are important for a person's development in the future.

At the end of the students' first term (the EAP course had been taught in the month prior to the first term) several of the students involved were interviewed along with other international students who had not attended the EAP course. In these interviews there were indications that the students who attended the EAP course had a more sophisticated understanding of the epistemology underlying the educational practices discussed. If social constructivism is taken as an example, although all of the students (course attendees and non-attendees) professed a liking for the interactive nature of seminar discussions, there seemed to be a less elaborated understanding of the purposes of these amongst the non-attendees, whilst in contrast some students who had attended the EAP course referred to discussion as being a part of the construction of knowledge.

**Quantitative**

A survey related to the students' attitudes (including cognitive, performative, and affective items) to the social, linguistic, and academic competences necessary for living and studying in the UK was used longitudinally with the attendees and a similar group of non-attendees. Although this survey suffers from the typical limitations of such research (small numbers and non-random allocation of participants) there is a suggestion from the findings that in most categories the students who attended the EAP course rated themselves at the end of the first term with more confidence than the students who did not attend. In one component only – *Linguistic Competence* – the non-attendees rated themselves more highly. An interpretation of this could be that the EAP course attendees may have chosen to focus their attention on coming to terms with the epistemological requirements of the courses whilst the non-attendees may still have focussed their adaptation efforts on improving their knowledge and use of English.

The feeling amongst the academic staff is that the course has had a positive influence on the students' first period of adaptation, and as a result a condensed version of the course – more reliant on blended learning delivery – is now an integral part of the induction programme of all Masters students entering the business school.

**Advice to others**

This approach is dependent upon participation and involvement of the academic staff who will be teaching the students after the EAP course. The implied changes for the students – related to identity and culture – are not accomplished in the duration of a one-month course, and the approach has further implications for any institution intending to become truly internationalised (Richie 2006). Staff are not always mindful that their teaching and assessment practices are not *the* sole and obvious way to do things but instead are *one* way of doing things. The approach taken in this EAP course implies a continuation beyond

students' induction, it calls for sensitivity and awareness amongst academics that, for example, posting information concerning an inventive assessment task on the course VLE is not adequate and the assumptions it makes may need to be unpicked. Certain terms: 'case study', 'literature review', 'critical', 'application', do not speak unambiguously for themselves and are open to different interpretations even amongst academics of a shared background. Developing such mindfulness calls for staff-development activities, probably involving EAP teachers, so it is therefore necessary to make friends and to press for changes diplomatically.

**Reflection/any other comments**
The profession of teaching English for Academic Purposes has been distorted by the increasing and undeserved reliance on the IELTS examination, and the industry which has grown up around it. Entry requirements of most universities insist on students achieving specified scores in this examination, hence activities labelled 'EAP courses' risk being reduced to preparing students for this examination. Such courses have no bearing on expected student behaviours in universities and indeed may create a reward loop to encourage behaviours which are not desired. It needs to be recognised that whether or not a student has competence with the surface features of language they will certainly need to be aware of deeper – epistemological – requirements associated with the culture of learning they are entering. The obverse of this – if universities are to be truly international rather than only seeking to absorb international students into one unanalysed way of doing things – is the necessity for all university staff to recognise that by being aware of the needs of international students they are of necessity becoming more reflective of their own assumptions and practices, and this itself presents the opportunity for increased awareness, reflectivity, and a possible synergy of different forms of creating knowledge.

**Further details [urls; relevant references/publications; alternative contact names]**
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**Keywords**
EAP, epistemology, Business School, internationalisation, mindfulness