

TITLE: *Addressing the issue of graduates lacking key employability related skills: a Case Study from the University of Sydney Business School of effective learning support for undergraduate business communication skills in first year.*

ABSTRACT (150 words) – The challenge of Business School graduates lacking the skills for job readiness is one that has existed for decades. Communication skills are one of the 21st century soft skills particularly lacking. This is an issue experienced across postgraduate and undergraduate courses with the suggestion to embed programs in first year undergraduate subjects to provide the best chance of improving student learning and development. Our study explores the triple accredited University of Sydney Business Schools business communication learning and support program (BCAW) undertaken by all students enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce in their first semester. Examining 10,000 students over a five-year period (2018-2022), the preliminary findings suggest such programs are effective in developing students' business communication skills with average exam marks increasing by up to 10%.

Keywords management education, undergraduate, business communication

Contextualisation: the lack of communication skills among university graduates

The issue of business school graduates' skills not effectively meeting workplace requirements, is one discussed for decades among scholars (Jackson, 2009; Lang, 2009; Nicolaidis and Michalopoulos, 2004; Riebe and Jackson, 2014; Woodside, 2018; & Garner et al., 2019). With dwindling international student numbers caused by COVID-19 and ongoing cost cutting and pressures on Australian Universities as government financial support decreases (Welch, 2022), addressing this gap could be a potential point of differentiation for

Australian Business Schools by boosting graduate employability and therefore improvement in rankings and employability reputation.

Graduate Careers Australia (2018) contends that the most important attributes required by graduates, according to employers, are interpersonal skills and communication skills. The International Education of Australia (IEAA, 2016) define communication skills as all aspects of communication including English language proficiency and written and oral skill sets.

The issue within Business Schools

A significant concern across universities and a particular issue in Business Schools is a lack of appropriate communication skills development among students. Brink and Costigan (2015) found in review of 207 AACSB Accredited Business Schools in the United States, that there was a misalignment between Business School programs' priorities in relation to communication skills verses those of employers. Specifically, there is too much emphasis in Business Schools on public speaking with a need for more behavioural and social communication skills related to management needing to be taught. The review however only focused on oral communication skills, not written. Interestingly, alumni identified the development of verbal and written communication skills by AACSB Business Schools as a core area lacking when entering the workplace. This has led for a call for more research into practical strategies to improve such attributes within Business School curricula (Garner et. al., (2019).

The misalignment of workplace needs, and graduates' communication abilities developed at university, is not limited to a specific level of tertiary Business education, occurring across undergraduate (Kleckner & Marshall, 2014) and postgraduate (Varela

(2019) business course graduates globally. There is, however, growing discussion around the disparity between domestic and international students' communications skills and the level of support offered to the different cohorts (e.g., Sonnenschein and Ferguson, 2020).

Nonetheless, Arkoudis (2014) argues universities should avoid only offering support for writing and listening skills to international students. Valdez (2015) concurs, advocating offering equal opportunities to participate in classroom discussions among international and domestic students. No matter the cohort, the consensus centres on implementing more evidence-based best practices to develop both international and domestic students' communication skills, together with disciplinary knowledge (IEAA, 2016).

First year students and interventions

Addressing this communication skills challenge, needs to occur from the first year of a business degree to ensure adequate development and consistency throughout different business subject content and communicative processes. Embedding the development of such skills in discipline-specific teaching and learning, as well as assessments, to ensure strong curriculum alignment from the start of a degree, will encourage successful uptake from students (Calma, 2013). However, research highlights that first-year students can often be over-confident in skills, particularly written communication, resulting in a lack of engagement in communication support and demotivation occurring with assessment results (Goldfinch & Hughes, 2007). Intervention approaches are historically and widely accepted in addressing this issue (i.e., Hattie et. al. 1997; & Graham, Hampton & Willett, 2010).

However, limited recent literature explores what is explicitly done in Australian undergraduate business school courses within the first year in terms of interventions, as well as embedded business communication programs and support within curriculum. The other

concern is the limited size of samples when exploring Australian undergraduate business communication support, restricting claims of causality and generalisation to the sector.

Addressing the gap

How Business Schools can explicitly address this gap and support their entire student cohort while aligning with the needs of employers is widely debated. Some suggest the need for frameworks to be inbuilt within a curriculum, and staff trained through professional development workshops to administer the syllabus within disciplinary-based units (Johnson, Veitch & Dewiyanti, 2015). Others suggest short courses to be offered externally to discipline-specific units, facilitated by English language focused University departments or colleges (e.g., Varela, 2019; & Garner et al., 2019). There is also the growing practice of using work-integrated learning (WIL) units and ‘real-work based projects’ to develop social and soft skills, including communication (e.g., Rhew, Black & Kheels, 2019).

Calls are also growing to closely examine the implementation of such learning activities and their evaluations (such as assessments) for quality assurance and ensure AACSB Accredited Business Schools meet the communication learning goals as per their accreditation requirements (Brink & Costigan 2015; Rhew, Black & Kheels, 2019). Australian universities, in particular, are urged to make specific development and assessment of communication skills a ‘core business,’ assisting to improve education success and enrich graduate employability (Calma, 2013; IEAA, 2016). No matter the initiative, consensus maintains the critical nature of support offered targeting both domestic and international students (Johnson et al. 2015; Arkoudis, 2014; & Sonnenschein & Ferguson, 2020).

Overview of Study

Considering this, our research presents a case study of the triple accredited (AACSB, AMBA and EQUIS) University of Sydney Business School (USBC) non-credit bearing Business Communication and Academic Writing learning support program (BCAW). This is embedded within the first-year core undergraduate introductory management unit BUSS1000, compulsory for all Bachelor of Commerce (including double degree) students. The program is the only one of its kind in the USBC, designed to provide students with tailored assistance through interventions by one specific English-language trained academic, focusing on BUSS1000's formative and summative assessment. Initially (pre-2020) only available (and compulsory) for students identified as being 'high-risk' in relation to their communication abilities (primarily written), the BCAW program in 2020 became available to all enrolled students in BUSS1000 on a voluntary basis.

Examining 10,000 students over a five year period (2018-2022), the study is one of the first of its kind encompassing findings from not only the transition from face-to-face classes to online as a result of the emergency situation related to COVID-19 lockdowns and border closures in Australia, but also capturing insights into the different needs in relation to business communication support for undergraduate students who primarily underwent their senior high school years of education unexpectedly online in comparison to pre-COVID-19 students. Evaluating the program, the study has two primary foci:

1. *Does engagement with the BCAW program improve students' performance in BUSS1000, therefore positively contributing to the development of University of Sydney graduate outcomes?*
2. *When comparing voluntary participation verses a mandatory attendance protocol in BCAW, are there differences in students' performance in BUSS1000?*

Business Communication (BCAW) Learning Support Program Overview

The BCAW program begins with a mandatory written diagnostic to be undertaken by all BUSS1000 students in Week 1 of the semester to identify those who may benefit from the learning support program. Students are then granted access to a series of workshops (eight) with targeted formative assessment interventions throughout the semester. The deployed interventionist approach targets students identified as underperforming or at-risk. This is reportedly the most frequent form of learning support deployed at the tertiary educational level (Wong & Li, 2020).

The program's pedagogical approach is the provision of support interventions 'mapped' to the curriculum of the credit bearing unit it supports (Wang, 2015) focusing on communication skills, predominantly written. Formative assessments and process-oriented feedback are provided by the BCAW academic prior to three credit bearing task submissions. The aim is to 'bridge the gap' between student and marker expectations, focusing on negotiation of meaning in assessment rubrics (Kingston & Forland, 2008) and sensemaking of performance feedback as a process to develop learning strategies (Carless & Boud, 2018).

In early 2020 the final iteration of the face-to-face (f2f) program commenced, focusing on a select group of students who were mandated to attend (identified through the written diagnostic). Major changes due to the pandemic initiated a program redesign and move to a 100% online mode of delivery. This included the transformation of the handwritten diagnostic into the first fully digitized writing diagnostic at the USBC, and the redesign of the Learning Support program into a voluntary 'access for all' model. This encompasses asynchronous on-demand resources and live video conferenced workshops. Such transformation enabled access to support for all students engaging in distance learning both locally and for the first time, students who remained abroad. The most recent iteration of the program (fully online – Semester 2, 2020) preserves the previously mentioned pedagogical approach. The difference

now is that the interventions are firmly seated in the well-established realm of online and distance education.

Stages of Study

Considering the different iterations of the BCAW program over the five years of investigation in response to the learning environment constraints (e.g., compulsory online learning), the research will examine the program in three stages.

1. The first being the two years (2018-2019) prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic (*pre-pandemic program/years*) where the BCAW program was delivered entirely f2f.
2. The second stage encompasses the year (2020) in which the program had to be transitioned into a new online format in Week 4 of the semester due to the pandemic (*transition year*); and
3. The third stage entailing the two years (2021-2022) following the transition (*post-transition program/years*) where the delivery mode is entirely online combining synchronous and asynchronous learning.

Data Collection & Analysis

Collected over the five-year period, Stage 1 data encompasses diagnostic results and engagement in the program and its activities from the f2f classes. Stage 2 and 3 encompasses data sources included various analytics housed inside the learning management system Canvas to help including:

- Canvas Studio (interaction with videos)
- Quizzes
- Students' interactions with each Canvas page

- Turnitin
- Marks and feedback per submitted task.

Additionally, data was collected from the credit-bearing unit BCAW is embedded in: BUSS1000, including learning analytics from the LMS (i.e., video engagement, page clicks, and discussion board) as well as individual assessment marks, feedback and overall unit grades. This helps correlate the effectiveness of interventions in developing communication skills (based on improvement and comparison of marks/grades across the cohort).

Data analysis is currently in the preliminary stages with SPSS being used to conduct multi-linear regression analysis to determine relationships between various variables to explore the aforementioned research foci.

Preliminary Findings of Study

Preliminary findings of Stage 1 confirm the effectiveness of the BCAW program. Of the students identified via the then handwritten diagnostic to attend the mandatory program, 337 who attended all sessions and completed all formative learning support interventions achieved recognizable improvements. Although performing poorly in the diagnostic, these students received a final exam grade 5% higher on average than their support program classmates who did not submit any formative writing tasks; some receiving a grade 7-10% higher. These 337 students also achieved an average grade just 1% lower than the final exam average. This is indicative of the BCAW learning support program effectively developing written communication skills through the interventions it deploys. Further analysis is required to establish if similar positive results carry on with the transition of the program from f2f to online delivery using a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning initiatives.

It is expected that at the time of MOBTS Oceania conference in Jan 2023, data analysis will be in advanced stages, permitting more rigorous findings to have emerged, and will be prepared for presentation.

Limitations & Contributions

With data analysis being in the preliminary stages, discussions around the initial findings are more of an exploratory nature, limiting the current overall contribution of the study. However, as data analysis progresses and rigorous findings emerge, the applicability and usefulness of such findings from a longitudinal and extremely large study, will assist to assess the effectiveness of such programs like BCAW. This can be used to advocate the need for similar programs to be embedded within other Business School's first year units to improve undergraduate management education.

It is recognised that the study is currently limited to the use of quantitative data (improvement in grades and learning analytics) as a success factor for measuring the level of effectiveness of the program, its interventions, delivery mode and accessibility. The inability to conduct triangulation with qualitative methods is additionally another restraint however, the sheer size of the study assists in providing support for any emerging findings.

Reference List

Arkoudis, S. (2014), *Integrating English language communication skills into disciplinary curricula: Options and strategies*. Australian Government: Office for Learning & Teaching, https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1805185/Arkoudis_S_NST_report_2014.pdf

Arkoudis, S. & Kelly, P. (2016). *Shifting the narrative: international students and communication skills in higher education*. International Education Association of Australia. <https://www.ieaa.org.au/documents/item/664>

Brink, K.E. & Costigan, R.D. (2015). Oral Communication Skills: Are the Priorities of the Workplace and AACSB-Accredited Business Programs Aligned? *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, (14)2, 205-221. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amle.2013.0044>

Carless, D., & Boud, D. (2018). The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(8), 1315-1325, DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354

Calma, A. (2013). Fixing holes where the rain gets in: problem areas in the development of generic skills in business. *Journal of International Education in Business*, 6(1), 35–50. <https://doi.org/10.1108/18363261311314944>

Garner, B.R., Gove, M., Ayala, C. & Mady, A. (2019). Exploring the gap between employer's needs and undergraduate business curricula: A survey of alumni regarding core business curricula. *Industry and Higher Education*, 33(6), 439-437. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422219876498>

Goldfinch, J., & Hughes, M. (2007). Skills, learning styles and success of first-year undergraduates. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 8(3), 259–273.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787407081881>

Graduate Careers Australia (2018), 'Graduate Careers Australia', Australia, viewed 17 June 2019, <http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/>

Graham, A., Hampton, M., & Willett, C. (2010). What not to write: An intervention in written communication skills for accounting students. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 8(2), 67–74. <https://doi.org/10.3794/ijme.82.265>

Hattie, J., Biggs, J., & Purdie, N. (1996). Effects on learning skills interventions on student learning: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 66, 99-136.

Jackson, D. (2009). Undergraduate management education: its place, purpose and efforts to bridge the skills gap. *Journal of Management and Organization* 15(2): 206–223.

Johnson, S., Veitch, S. & Dewiyanti, S. (2015). A framework to embed communication skills across the curriculum: A design-based research approach. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 12(4), <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.12.4.6>

Kingston, E., & Forland, H. (2008). Bridging the Gap in Expectations Between International Students and Academic Staff. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(2).

Kleckner, M.J. & Marshall C.J. (2014). Critical communication skills: developing course competencies to meet workforce needs. *The Journal of Research in Business Education*, 56(2), 59-81. <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.sydney.edu.au/docview/1764323553?pq-origsite=primo>

Lang, M. (2009). Conflict management: a gap in business education curricula. *Journal of Education for Business*, 84(4), 240–245.

Nicolaidis, C.S. & Michalopoulos, G. (2004). Education, industry and the knowing-doing gap. *Industry and Higher Education*, 18(2), 101–110.

Rhew, N. D., Black, J. A., & Keels, J. K. (2019). Are we teaching what employers want? Identifying and remedying gaps between employer needs, accreditor prescriptions, and undergraduate curricular priorities. *Industry & Higher Education*, 33(6), 362–369.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422219874703>

Riebe, L. & Jackson, D. (2014). The use of rubrics in benchmarking and assessing employability skills. *Journal of Management Education*, 38(3), 319–344.

Sonnenschein, K., & Ferguson, J. (2020). Developing professional communication skills: Perceptions and reflections of domestic and international graduates. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 17(3), 53–69. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.17.3.5>

Valdez, G. (2015). U.S. Higher Education Classroom Experiences of Undergraduate Chinese International Students, *Journal of International Students*, 5(2), 88-200.

Varela, O.E. (2020). Teaching core soft skills into business curriculum: Can we teach longitudinally?, *Journal of Education for Business*, 95(3), 180-192, DOI: [10.1080/08832323.2019.1627992](https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2019.1627992)

Wang, C. (2015). Mapping or tracing? Rethinking curriculum mapping in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 40-9

Welch, A. (2022). A plague on higher education? COVID, Camus and Culture Wars in Australian universities. *Higher Education Quarterly* 76(2), 213-229.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12377>

Wong, B.T., & Li, K.C. (2020). A review of learning analytics intervention in higher education (2011–2018). *Journal of Computers in Education*, 7, 7-28.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40692-019-00143-7>

Woodside, J. (2018). Real-world rigour: an integrative learning approach for industry and higher education. *Industry and Higher Education*, 32(5), 285–289.