Analysing the communication hub: A reflection on the successes and challenges of a project aimed at improving the experience of ANESB students at university

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Many studies show that difficulties with English language lead to failure and dropout amongst Australian non-English speaking background students (ANESB) particularly in the first year of tertiary study. It is evident that underdeveloped grammar, structure and reading ability can add to the difficulty of completing assessments; breaches of academic integrity may also occur. One regional university’s learning centre implemented a Communication Hub as a retention strategy, targeting ANESB students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Through explicit teaching, workshop activity and identification of student needs, the Communication Hub aimed to equip ANESB students with the skills for successful engagement, which include communication skills, increased self-confidence and social interaction. The Hub also attempted to create a sense of belonging for ANESB students, ensuring there are collaborative learning opportunities and peer-to-peer contact, catering to diversity, and integrating and scaffolding opportunities for students to learn tertiary literacies. The project was carried out by experienced advisors across six campuses. Evaluation of the project was carried out through attendance data, focus groups and surveys completed by staff and students involved. Findings revealed that staff assumptions of this group were misinformed; however, while the uptake of this adjunct service was low, students who did engage experienced significant benefits. This evaluation also identified the need for a holistic and embedded approach to supporting all students, including ANESB students. This new approach is currently being trialled and further careful research undertaken to identify the needs of this target group and the services that best support them.

Learning outcomes
- To explore the impact of the service provided by the Communication Hub for Australian NESB students
- To seek ways of improving support services and determine the most appropriate methods of providing academic support for Australian non-English speaking backgrounds who undertake degree programs.
- To identify the needs and learning preferences of NESB students and to adjust approaches to providing support based on evidence rather than assumptions.

Presenters
Michelle Broad, Central Queensland University

Michelle Broad is an Associate Lecturer working with the School of Education Academic Learning Centre (ALC) and the STEPS enabling course at CQUniversity. She came to working in enabling education by way of working with marginalised groups preparing to re-enter the workforce, teaching English in China and working as a public health professional. Michelle has a particular interest in the role education plays in the wellness of individuals and how education providers can most effectively support students to meet their academic goals.

Valerie Cleary, Central Queensland University

Valerie Cleary has been an educator in a range of contexts for 40 years and has a well-developed knowledge of adult learning. Val Cleary has worked in a number of schools as a literacy educator and has developed strategies and resources to assist adult learners to improve writing skills in preparation for successful undergraduate study. In her work she gives consideration to the broad experiences, beliefs and values that the diverse learners at CQUniversity hold.

She currently works with the School of Access Education Academic Learning Centre (ALC) as Head of Services. In this role she leads a team of advisers who provide both internal and distance undergraduate students for all CQUniversity schools with assistance to develop academic skills across academic writing, computing, science, mathematics and statistics disciplines.