

Postgraduate Studies and NESB Students: Expectations vs reality Kerry ELLERINGTON & Amanda BAYLISS, Melbourne University Private

Melbourne University Private (MUP) is a newly accredited private university wholly owned by the University of Melbourne. To gain accreditation as a university MUP has had to satisfy the MCEETYA Guidelines including the requirement to 'award higher education qualifications across a range of fields'. The MUP School of International Communication and Languages, one of three schools in MUP, offers a two-year Master of English (International) to non-English speaking students who satisfy the entry requirement of a recognised first degree and an overall IELTS score of 5.5. The introductory component of this Masters program, conducted by both coursework and research, involves enrolment in intensive English language subjects and individual research projects. This paper considers the difference between the rhetoric and reality of the Master of English (International) program and, in particular, examines the difference between both teacher and student expectations in the first cohort of this unique course. The rhetoric, as outlined in advertising and management expectations, included the pre-conceived ideas of agents, participants and university administration as well as the expectations and understanding of teaching staff. The reality of the course as it developed, however, proved different to the rhetoric. Based on teacher experience and student feedback, it was found that if best practice was to be maintained, the expectations of all parties had to be adjusted and the rhetoric changed accordingly.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the experience of the various stakeholders involved in the delivery of the first stage of a new Masters of English (International), [MoE(I)], offered through the School of International Languages and Communication at Melbourne University Private. Of particular note is the difference between the expectations of each stakeholder group prior to course commencement and the reality experienced once the course began. The effect of the rhetoric on the expectations of students and other stakeholders is considered, as is the way in which the rhetoric changed over time to more adequately reflect the reality of the course.

BACKGROUND

In July 2003 Melbourne University Private (MUP) was re-accredited with full university status. As part of the accreditation process, the MUP application stated that the University of Melbourne sought to establish a private arm in order 'to provide services that could not or should not be developed within the public institution'. The Masters of English (International) was developed exclusively for full fee paying overseas students, with an IELTS entry of 5.5, in the belief that such a course should not, and quite possibly could not, be developed through the public university. It is a course, however, uniquely suited to the needs of the students for which it has been provided.

The Masters of English (International) is a full-time two-year program, divided into three stages: a Graduate Certificate, a Graduate Diploma and a Masters level. On entry, students undertake a full-time intensive English language development program as a prerequisite for entry to the Graduate Diploma component of the course, which is a further prerequisite for entry into the second, Masters Year of study.

THE RHETORIC

The published aim of the course is for NESB students to achieve a high level of professional competence in English in a recognised Masters course, accredited and quality assured by the University of Melbourne. The initial rhetoric of the marketing team and published advertising material emphasised the course's most distinctive features:

- A strong commitment to quality;
- A 2-year Masters, with an entry of IELTS Band 5.5;
- A potential pathway to other postgraduate courses whilst gaining a university award;
- A focus on developing professional competence in English.

The rhetoric was heard and interpreted by clients including overseas agents, who in turn passed on information to students. It became obvious as events unfolded that the agents and subsequently students, regardless of what they had been told, primarily understood that MoE(I) was 'different': it offered a university award while studying for a rapid improvement in English proficiency; and it was a masters program that could be entered with an IELTS score of only 5.5.

In contrast, local agents – including teachers from the Hawthorn English Language Centre (HELCC), which shares the MUP campus – appear to have used quite different rhetoric when advising their students of further study options. Rather than selling the masters course, they advised students of 'alternate pathways' in the light of previous studies and future aspirations. In particular, the Graduate Certificate in English (International) provided an alternative for students who had failed to meet the IELTS Band requirement for entry to their preferred course: it offered another semester of intensive English study before students could re-sit IELTS, in the hope of attaining the required entry score for their preferred Masters course.

It was apparent, therefore that the rhetoric had led to different expectations among different stakeholder groups that were 'external' to the course itself. Management expected high enrolments as a result of dynamic marketing and hoped for rapid course success; marketing staff and local agents anticipated a 'Masters' course that would rapidly improve proficiency levels while local sources saw it as an alternative way to enter other university courses.

It was also apparent that there were different expectations held by 'internal' stakeholders, who were more closely associated with the students and course delivery.

The lecturers understood that the courses needed to be excellent in both quality and outcomes. Their goal, in the first (Graduate Certificate) stage of the course, was to cater for a group of students with diverse language proficiency levels and teach them on a needs basis, in order to prepare them for entry to Graduate Diploma programs at the end of the first semester.

It was felt that those students presenting with IELTS 7 would need to be challenged, whilst those with an entry score of 5.5 would require language development. Lecturers with an IELTS/ELICOS background were very aware of the language deficiencies to be expected at IELTS 5.5 and were determined that courses should concentrate on the development of language proficiency. It was thought by others, however, including some administrators, that the students were enrolled in a 'Masters' course and should therefore be dealt with at that level, with an associated 'academic' pitch in spoken discourse, written material and class content.

THE REALITY

Students entering the Master of English program had very individual expectations, based on how they had been 'sold' the course, their own motivation factors and individual experiences of both ELICOS and tertiary study. Those in the first intake, when interviewed at orientation,

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were unable to articulate their expectations and appeared uninformed, despite having received a considerable volume of material about the course. Their expectations were not clearly voiced until they encountered the 'reality' of the course and found that it was, for some, neither what they had anticipated nor what they wanted.

It was apparent that there was also a conflict between the expectations of student administration and the 'reality' they encountered in the initial weeks of the first semester. Administrative staff found that, during enrolment, students were unprepared. They had not selected subjects or course pathways and did not appear to understand that they must do so. Students were less independent and confident than expected and proficiency levels were lower than anticipated, with most finding it extremely hard to understand the discourse of administrative staff. Although a number of factors may have contributed to this, including the recent arrival of students, it appeared that administrative personnel generally failed to appreciate the proficiency implications of an IELTS score of 5.5 and found that the students were not at the 'Masters' level they had anticipated.

Lecturers also found that their expectations were not met once students arrived. After initial interviews and class commencement, teaching staff were concerned that students generally had lower proficiency levels than indicated by their entry scores ranging from IELTS 5.5 to 7, necessitating an adjustment in pitch and expectations of what might be achievable in the first six months of study.

At the same time, it became apparent that there was a level of disquiet amongst some of the students. In an attempt to measure expectations versus reality and evaluate the overall course program, individual subjects and teaching, a process of on-going evaluation commenced. This included interviews and anonymous surveys.

Initial surveys of the first cohort, undertaken in Week 4 of classes, revealed that 59% of students had expected the Master of English (International) to be 'different'. Only 22% of students had encountered a course that met with their expectations and, in spite of the material they had received prior to enrolment, 19% had held no expectations.

Survey results and interviews revealed that students had anticipated a course that commenced at 'Masters' level, with formal lectures, less practical class work, less English language tuition, less assigned work and more free time. Most students indicated that they considered themselves to be either advanced or fluent English speakers and therefore did not need, or want, language instruction.

Lecturers had not anticipated these expectations. They found that when classes were delivered at a level considered appropriate for student abilities, students compared it to 'language school' rather than 'university'. However, when a more formal, 'academic' approach was adopted, students complained that the classes were too difficult.

This created a dilemma for lecturers, for what they believed the students needed was not what they (the clients) wanted, nor was it consistent with the prescribed course requirements. In their view, adopting a lecture-format, content-based approach would not enable the linguistic advancement required prior to commencement of the Graduate Diploma or Masters subjects. The scene was thus set for an on-going process of evaluation and adjustment in an attempt to meet student expectations without damaging the integrity of the course. In order to achieve this, it was considered imperative to alter both the rhetoric (to alter student expectations) and the reality encountered, where appropriate.

ADJUSTMENTS

As a result of the conflict between expectations and 'reality', administrative staff quickly adjusted their expectations of student independence and proficiency, and made appropriate changes to the way they interacted with students. Spoken and written discourse was

simplified to enable greater comprehension and information pertinent to student needs was also provided.

Marketing staff received feedback that their rhetoric needed to change. They were advised that material advertising the course had been pitched 'too high' and that both language and content should be simplified. Brochures needed to be easier to understand and the content of marketing material needed to be altered to emphasise an initial, compulsory, component of intensive English language study, which had to be completed prior to the commencement of any postgraduate subjects. Marketers were further informed that their 'rhetoric' had created expectations of direct entry to a 'Masters' program. This did not reflect the 'reality' of the course, either as it was delivered or as it was prescribed. These recommendations were accepted and the marketing 'rhetoric' was changed accordingly.

Lecturers also made adjustments to the reality of the course in order to offer the initial intensive English language classes in a manner more appropriate for postgraduate students. Introductory subjects were delivered in a different manner, although the language focus and content remained unchanged. Each subject was divided into modules, taught by different teaching staff and offered at different times, with students required to 'sign up' for class times of their choice. This created a perception of flexibility, enabled individual timetables and allowed students to mix with different peers in each class. Where appropriate, classes were delivered using different methodologies, including simple lectures and tutorials, to create an academic 'feel' to the course.

RESULTS

It was noted that the second intake of students arrived with considerably more realistic expectations of the course. They were well informed, well prepared, and had mapped out subject pathways. Administrative staff found their new 'pitch' to be appropriate and lecturers experienced less resistance to introductory classes.

84% of the second cohort of students reported that the course was consistent with, or far exceeding, their expectations. The remaining students, all of whom seemed to have enrolled via one overseas agent, had anticipated direct entry to a 'Masters' program. It was therefore determined that further adjustment to the rhetoric of this particular source would be required.

CONCLUSION

It is understandably difficult to create 'rhetoric' about a 'reality' that does not yet exist. In retrospect, it is apparent that the initial rhetoric about the Master of English (International) did not match the reality encountered by different stakeholders when the course actually commenced. However, this discrepancy was quickly addressed by a responsive and co-operative team. As a result, the expectations of administrative staff, lecturers and students are now generally being met and student feedback is encouraging.

For best practice to occur in any industry, the expectations of all stakeholders, particularly the clients, must be met in reality. It is essential, therefore, to create a rhetoric which leads to attainable expectations. Teachers understand that both teaching and learning are dynamic in nature, requiring constant consultation, evaluation and response in order for best practice to occur, thereby satisfying both student wants and needs. However, the experience of the Master of English (International) at Melbourne University Private has demonstrated that this dynamism cannot be limited to the teaching program and classroom, but must apply to all course stakeholders if the rhetoric is to create appropriate expectations, enabling the program to ultimately deliver what it promises.

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