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Developing professional communication skills: Perceptions and reflections of domestic and international graduates

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Keywords

Communication skills, graduate attributes, international students, management education, international education



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Introduction

As organisations face increasing competition, developments in information technologies and globalisation, there are consequent changes to the nature of work. Such changes have two broad implications for graduates, universities and employers. First, graduates expect universities to offer degree programmes that prepare them adequately for their work lives. Second, employers expect graduates to make an efficient transition to effective performance in their careers (Ferguson 2017). According to Graduate Careers Australia (2018), employers claim that the most important attributes required by graduates are interpersonal skills and communication skills, and Jackson (2014) similarly asserts that communication is crucial for successful job performance and achievement.

Much research has focused on managers' perceptions of graduate attributes as well as the importance and means of developing communication skills, whereas few studies have paid attention to graduates' perspectives (Jackson 2014) and, in particular, Chinese graduates' perspectives. Given the disagreement among different stakeholders about the manifestation of graduate attributes in the workplace, it is also important to investigate graduates' perceptions and reflections of their use of these attributes (Barrie 2006) including communication skills. According to Morreale and Pearson (2008), effective communication skills should be taught in educational systems.

This paper explores the use and importance of communication skills. The literature review explores prominent and current thinking about communications skills inspired by different stakeholders' narratives of their experiences developing and using communication skills. The paper supports the argument for drawing attention to the importance of communication skills for employability. It also provides an argument for greater access to resources within curricula and in stand-alone programmes. This paper reflects on the appropriateness of strategies for communication skill development for domestic and Chinese graduates, the usefulness of these skills to graduates' employers, and the further development of communication skills.

The overarching purpose of the paper is to compare Australian and Chinese graduates' perceptions of the importance of communication skills for employability and the development of these skills at university. The number of Chinese international students in Australia is substantial (Department of Education and Training 2017). Chinese international students represent 25% of the international students in higher education, making them the largest group of international students (Department of Education and Training 2017). It is also relevant to explore the impact of the use of this important graduate attribute when graduates enter the job market in Australia and China and the employers' different needs in both countries. The paper is a review of two separate studies in terms of the similarities and differences in graduates' perspectives of and reflections on their abilities to communicate.

Study Context

The graduates in Study 1 were from a range of Australian universities and had studied in different degree programmes, including commerce, business, information technology, law, psychology and nursing. Participants in Study 2 had undertaken their studies at a South East Queensland university and were all undergraduate and postgraduate students of tourism and hospitality programmes. These participants had achieved the requisite score for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System).

This study has two main statements of purpose:

- 1) What are the perceptions of Australian and Chinese graduates of Australian universities of the importance of communication skills in Australian and Chinese workplaces and the development of these skills at Australian universities?
- 2) How do graduates' comments and development alongside the current literature enable recommendations for the improvement of communication skills development?

Literature Review

The Importance of Communication Skills

There are three broad themes identified in the literature. First, the importance of communication skills. Second, strategies for integrating communication skills during lectures. Third, strategies for integrating communication skills outside of lectures. Within the broad themes there are subsidiary themes emerging from the literature. These include employer and student expectations, the intercultural context, challenges especially for Chinese students, and appropriateness of the methods used to develop skills at university. Other themes include strategies for developing skills outside the lectures such as work integrated learning (WIL) and student organisations and committees.

Many companies insist that universities should develop students' soft skills since disciplinary knowledge is not sufficient for a successful career (Gerstein, Friedman & Hershey 2016). While there is much debate about the types of skills required, the need for good communication skills is apparent (Jackson 2016). The literature highlights that employers expect strong communication skills from graduates (Robles 2012) or identify communication as one of the most important skill sets (Brink & Costigan 2015). While scholars (Stowe, Parent, Schwartz & Sendall 2012) have highlighted verbal, written and interpersonal skills, they have also shown that employers often emphasise one skill set over others. For instance, Heron (2019) reports that oral communication skills, particularly the ability to present and communicate to a diverse range of audiences, are most important, while Robles (2012) argues that communication is an important interpersonal skill.

The literature is inconsistent with regard to the needs for communication in industry versus the levels of graduates' competence. For example, Moore and Morten (2017) add that the written communication skills that are taught are often different from those requested in the workplace. They also argue that the written communication skills required can vary across different workplaces, and therefore, it is difficult to identify generic communication skills that are relevant for any job. Even though Moore and Morton (2015) argue that written communication skills are not as poor as often argued in government reports, Jackson (2014) claims that communication is one of the least developed skills among graduates. In a study undertaken by Clokie and Fourie (2016), it appeared that written communication and interpersonal skills were lacking in graduates even though these skills were part of course content. They recommend the incorporation of communication skills at all levels of programmes to ensure industry relevance. It is important to develop an evaluation of the use of communication skills that may inform and enable successful teaching and learning in higher education as called for by some authors (Jackson 2014; Jackson & Chapman 2012).

Strategies for Integrating Communication Skills during Lectures

Discussions, individual/group presentations, and group projects are typical examples of ways to develop communication skills in lectures, seminars and tutorials. However, not all students are likely to participate in class discussions. Heron (2019) explains that students may not be able to use oral skills when they begin their studies at university. The participative learning style and oral skills often used in Western teaching may be a challenge for Chinese students, who are used to a teacher-centred culture (Zopiatis & Constanti 2012). However, Wong's (2004) study demonstrated that Chinese students at Australian institutions considered teaching using discussions, independent learning, and critical thinking to be particular strengths of their Australian degrees. It is important that educators encourage all students to participate using, for example, graded participation and cold calling (asking random students to participate). Such strategies have been found to increase participation (Dallimore, Hertenstein & Platt 2008). However, Valdez (2015) argues that international students might perceive graded participation negatively if they cannot participate in discussions on equal footing with domestic students. Tatar's (2005) study on Turkish international students' class participation in a US university demonstrated that these students expected educators to facilitate the flow of discussion, as they were not used to a student-centred teaching style. Valdez (2015), for instance, argues that training for academic staff is needed to help them develop inclusive learning practices for all students.

Whereas a few studies on the development of oral communication in the classroom have been conducted (Dallimore, Hertenstein & Platt 2008; Zopiatis & Constanti 2012; Tatar 2005; Heron 2019), less research has been undertaken regarding written communication. This might be because listening and responsiveness skills are often considered particularly important (Morgan 1997). However, Anderson (2013) and Morgan (2013) emphasise the importance of teaching discipline-specific writing skills such as those required in accounting. In particular, experiential stand-alone courses on communication skill development are needed. Another example of experiential learning is the e-portfolio, which is considered an important tool for students to develop their reflective communication skills according to Dune, Crnek-Georgeson, Bidewell, Firdaus, John and Arora (2018). An e-portfolio is an online learning platform, where students can share their reflections with other students or with teachers. This online tool can help students reflect on communication skills and intercultural communication among others.

Group work is another example of communication skill development (Lawlor et al. 2014). Cruickshank, Chen and Warren. (2012) argue that interactions between domestic and international students can be explained by how the groups are structured in university classrooms rather than by cultural issues. According to the authors, cultural factors are less important than contextual factors. Voleit and Ang (1998) argue that on the one hand, Australian students may resent groups of Chinese students, but on the other hand, Australian students tend to prefer low levels of cross-cultural interactions themselves. There is, therefore, a lack of spontaneous interactions between Australian and Chinese students, and they tend to study separately throughout their enrolment periods (Biggs 1994). However, other studies from the UK and the Netherlands on domestic students' feelings towards cross-cultural group work reported rather positive findings. Some of these students saw the benefits of working with people from other countries in that they could enhance their intercultural competencies. However, these benefits might not arise automatically when domestic and international students work together in projects. Therefore, planning and instruction by academics are needed to assist students in working cross-culturally (Tran & Pham 2016).

Early literature (Knight & de Wit 1995) suggested that one major function of global education is to enable students to work in international and intercultural contexts, thus preparing students for global

citizenship (Volet & Ang 1998). Furthermore, studies by Freeman, Ramburuth, Leask, Caulfield, Simpson, Ridings and Sykes (2009) indicated that business professionals need to be able to successfully communicate in increasingly intercultural work environments. Some studies, particularly those of Chinese MBA students in the USA, have noted that students need to become linguistically and socioculturally better equipped to prepare for effective communication in international trade (Shi 2011).

Strategies for Integrating Communication Skills outside of Lectures

De La Harpe and David (2012) claim that while a formal curriculum is essential, integrating an informal curriculum through external activities, such as WIL (Jackson, 2015), student organisations, and part-time jobs, is also necessary. Such activities help students develop generic skills (including communication skills) that academics do not feel confident teaching. For example, there are varying WIL strategies that equip graduates with attributes for employment (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick and Cragolini 2004). Such strategies include initiatives such as internships, field work, and cooperative projects operated through industry and/or community (Smith 2012; Wardle 2014). However, Jackson (2014) reports that students experience challenges during WIL programmes with public speaking and oral communication with colleagues and clients, among others. For this reason, the author suggests different strategies to overcome students' potential challenges during their WIL programmes. The different strategies recommended include preparation of students for their industry work, post-WIL reflections, mentoring and feedback during placement, and more collaboration between the university and industry.

WIL experiences can improve international students' communication because it allows them to gain insights into a workplace culture that is different from that in their home countries (Jackson 2017). However, many international students do not gain relevant work experience during their overseas studies through WIL experiences because of the reluctance of some employers to accept international students (Jackson 2017; Gribble 2014). Some reasons for employers' reluctance may be students' actual or perceived poor English. Poor English may be compounded by a lack of knowledge of Australian workplace culture and a lack of Australian networks (Gribble 2014; Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto & Carter 2014; Patrick et al. 2008; Sonnenschein et al. 2018).

The importance of WIL is defined in the Australian National Strategy on WIL, which aims to enhance student participation in Australia and better prepare both students and hosts to improve students' WIL experiences (Jackson 2017). However, according to Wardle (2014), the WIL agenda faces obstacles such as limited budgets, large cohorts, and difficulty placing international students and students with special needs. Participation and work experience in student organisations and committees may also enable students to develop their communication skills. Astin (1999) even argues that students' broader learning is enhanced when students are involved in both academic and social activities at universities. Interpersonal communication, writing and presentation skills may be developed through such involvement in student organisations (Stephenson, Mayes, Combs & Webber 2015; Hoover 2004).

Data were collected through two distinct qualitative studies from two separate research projects (Study 1 and Study 2). Both studies were published independently. Study 1 involved graduates working in Australia who were asked to identify the attributes they used most frequently in their employment and describe how they used them. Study 1 was part of a broader research project aiming to explore graduates' experiences using their graduate attributes during the early part of their careers. Graduate attributes identified as part of the broader research included knowledge, skills and other qualities, and this paper focuses on the skills component.

Study 2 involved Chinese graduates with Australian tourism and hospitality degrees who were working in China. They were asked to identify the three most important attributes that they considered necessary to enter the Chinese hotel industry. Study 2 was part of a research project investigating the perceptions of four stakeholder groups regarding the graduate attributes needed to enter the Chinese hospitality industry. For contextual purposes, Tables 1 and 2 below depict participant demographics, occupational areas and prior work experiences.

Table 1: Gender, occupational area, and prior work experience of the graduates (Study 1)

| Age range | | Gender | | Occupational area | | Prior work experience (number of graduates) | |
|-----------|----|--------|----|-------------------|----|--|----|
| Over 25 | 9 | Female | 20 | Public sector | 17 | Full-time employment | 6 |
| Under 25 | 16 | Male | 5 | Banking | 2 | Placement | 6 |
| | | | | Self-employed | 1 | Internship | 6 |
| | | | | Other | 5 | Volunteer work | 7 |
| | | | | | | Casual work | 14 |
| | | | | | | None | 1 |

Table 2: Job position, prior work experience, age and gender of the graduates (Study 2)

| Job position | Prior work experience (number of years) | Age | Gender |
|---|--|-----|--------|
| Assistant Deputy to the General Manager | 3 | - | F |
| Sales Coordinator | 2 | 26 | M |
| Sales Coordinator | 1.5 | 24 | M |
| Assistant Training Manager | 3 | 27 | F |
| Management Trainee | 2 | 23 | F |
| Receptionist | 1 | 26 | F |
| Management Trainee | 2 | 24 | M |

Participants

Study 1 consisted of semi-structured interviews with domestic Australian graduates (N=25) conducted from January to March 2014. All graduates had graduated from different South East Queensland Universities with one exception from Canberra. They had been enrolled in various degree programmes mostly including business and commerce with one nursing and one engineering degrees. One graduate was from China but had remained in Australia. The participants were in their first 12 to 18 months of employment. All participants graduated between 2010 and 2013. Sixteen of the Australian graduates were under 25. Five of the graduates were male, and 20 were female. Fifteen were employed in the public sector, two were employed in the banking industry, one was employed in the health industry, one was self-employed, one worked in mining, one worked in

insurance, two were employed in university services, one worked in administration, and one worked in accounting.

Study 2 also consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted from March to June 2014. The participants were Chinese graduates who had graduated between 2010 and 2013 and then returned to China. Of the 7 returned graduates, three were males, and four were females between 23 and 31 years of age. They had work experience in Chinese hotels, which ranged from less than one year to four years. There were two sales coordinators, two management trainees, one assistant training manager, one assistant deputy to a general manager, and one receptionist. Five of the interviews took place over Skype from Australia, and two took place in China.

Interviews

The Study 1 interviews with the Australian graduates included a card-sorting technique to help address gaps in the interview, to prompt deeper discussion (Kanye & Crous 2007; Neuman 2006) and to collect and verify additional data on graduates' skills and other qualities (Neuman 2006). There were eighteen cards, each showing one skill or other quality with a brief definition. Table 3 shows all of the skills and definitions on the cards.

Table 3: Skills and definitions used in the card-sort

| Skill | Definition |
|---|--|
| Collection, analysis and application of information | Ensuring that one has all relevant information at one's disposal to make decisions and recommendations |
| Communication | Actively listening, contributing, presenting and responding to information |
| Critical thinking | Evaluating, using and developing new ideas and responses to situations |
| Initiative and enterprise | Generating and trying new ideas and new ways of working |
| Planning and organising | Organising and prioritising current and future work tasks |
| Problem solving | Identifying, articulating and resolving problems |
| Self-management | Creating and managing activities and plans for one's own work and career |
| Teamwork | Actively participating as a key member of a productive, organised group |

Graduates were asked to review the cards and definitions of both the skills and other qualities. For the purpose of this paper, only the skills are discussed. Participants selected the relevant cards and described specific events when they had used skills and any skills they wanted to use but had not yet had the opportunity. The discussion included the following statement and questions:

I am interested to hear about specific events where you used your SOQs. Please look at these cards which explain the SOQs. Where relevant, select any of the cards and:

- i. Describe any events in your job where you have had to use these SOQs.
- ii. Were there any skills or other qualities from these cards that you wanted to use yet did not get the opportunity?
- iii. Tell me which how you would have used them.
- iv. Have you used any other skill or quality not shown on the cards?
- v. If so please tell me which skills or other qualities you used.
- vi. How did you use them?

The interviews in Study 2 were semi-structured. No card-sorting technique was used, and the participants were guided to discuss their own ideas about the three most important attributes for entering the hotel industry in China. Furthermore, they were asked about how the Australian university had assisted them in developing these attributes, as this question was part of the research objectives of the study. During the interviews of Study 1, some graduates mentioned how they perceived the development of the skill sets during the university enrolment, although this question was not directly part of the research objectives.

One of the limitations of the current paper was the complexity of combining the findings of the two different studies, despite their similarities. The overall topics of the two studies was relatively similar, as they both concerned the value of graduate attributes, especially communication skills. However, the two studies were conducted separately by two different authors and had different research objectives, sampling methods, and interview questions. The two authors of the current paper worked independently on each of their studies (Study 1 and Study 2). However, the authors worked on their studies during the same period and at the same university and frequently shared information with each other and discussed common issues related to the studies. Due to the insight that the authors had into each other's studies, the analysis of the findings for this paper were triangulated, which enhanced the validity of the study.

Furthermore, the participants in Study 2 were all tourism and hospitality graduates from one particular Southeast Queensland university who were working in the same industry, whereas the graduates from Study 1 had different educational backgrounds, were mostly Australian, were from different Australian universities and worked in different industries. Graduates from Studies 1 and 2 worked in two different countries, so although comparisons are possible, more cultural interpretation may be required. Another limitation may be the small number of participants, particularly in Study 2. Despite this limitation regarding the complexity of the sample, the findings can be considered even more generalisable when applied in a broader context. Quoting data from one participant, while instrumental in representing the perceptions of others, is also a possible limitation. There is an important case for the potential usefulness of gathering further data for stronger saturation and for developing a clearer focus on communication skills.

Analysis

In both studies, open codes were created instead of predefined codes (Woods, Paulus, Atkins & Macklin (2016), which made the research more inductive. In both studies, open codes were

developed at the beginning of the data analysis and then regrouped into more abstract categories (axial codes) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Subsequently, these categories were integrated into a core category through selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The coding process was performed with NVivo10 software. Finally, the categories were integrated into themes inductively (Braun & Clarke 2008). For the purpose of the current paper, the categories related to communication skills were identified and recoded after the initial coding of each study. Then, the new categories were arranged under the same central theme. Table 4 demonstrates the codes under the central theme ‘Communication skills’.

A systematic intercoder consistency by testing coding strategies was not used. The validity of the coding in both studies was ensured through peer review (Woods et al., 2016). Peer review provides a check on the research process (including the coding) and allows the reviewer to play ‘devil’s advocate’ by asking relevant and challenging questions about methods and analysis in order to keep the research honest and transparent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The main reviewers of this research study were supervisors, who assisted the authors throughout their studies by providing valuable feedback in the coding process.

Table 4: Summary of the axial codes, selective codes, and central theme

| Central theme: Communication skills | |
|--|--|
| Selective Code | Axial Code Study |
| Graduates’ perceptions of the importance of communication skills for a graduate entering the job market in Australia and China | Presentation skills |
| | Writing skills |
| | Intercultural skills |
| Graduates’ reflections on how they developed communication skills during their enrolment at the Australian university | Communication skills developed in the classroom |
| | Communication skills developed outside the classroom |

Findings

The findings from the card sort in Study 1 indicate that communication was mentioned most frequently for specific job activities. However, it was the first mentioned skill only four times, while planning and organising also was mentioned first four times and collecting and analysing information was mentioned first five times. Communication was the second mentioned skill eight times and was the third mentioned skill three times. This is interesting because many participants explained that competence in communication is important in developing competence in the other skills. In Study 2, four of seven graduates mentioned communication skills as one of the three most important skill sets among 14 generic skills. Furthermore, three graduates mentioned the importance of intercultural communication skills. Only teamwork and relationship-building skills were mentioned more frequently. The following comments represent the key findings in the interviews and discussion.

Importance of Communication Skills for Job Readiness

Oral and written skills were mentioned as important by an equal number of participants. Five graduates (four from Study 1 and one from Study 2) mentioned the importance of presentation skills at work. Three graduates from Study 1 added the importance of clearly presenting and communicating one's expectations of managers, clients, other team members and business partners. Quinn explained the importance of clear communication with all stakeholders:

...just being able to communicate concisely and clearly to whoever it is you happen to be talking to, whether it's an outside stakeholder or a supervisor.

Furthermore, five participants (four from Study 1 and one from Study 2) agreed that written communication skills were important. It was considered important to write professionally and concisely.

With regard to intercultural skills, there was an uneven number of participants who mentioned these skills as important in the two studies. Three graduates from Study 2 mentioned the importance of having intercultural skills when working in the hotel industry because of the different cultures represented among the staff and guests. For example, Kim mentioned benefiting from knowledge of Western culture when talking with an American customer:

I'm not afraid to talk to strangers or talk to Western people... I can find the shortcut to communicate with Westerners.

In contrast, no graduates from Study 1 discussed the importance of intercultural communication skills. It is understandable that these skills were considered to be crucial mainly among Chinese graduates who had studied overseas. Furthermore, 'intercultural skills' did not directly appear on the cards used as prompts in Study 1, which may also explain the lack of discussion of this particular skill set.

Reflections on the Development of Skills at University

Six graduates from both studies mentioned the usefulness of doing class presentations, participating in class discussion and doing written assignments for their development of communication skills. Two graduates from Study 2 mentioned that they had improved their written English skills by writing reports and essays at university. Others, such as Kim, emphasised that they had developed good presentation skills during their university studies:

Well, I'm not, you know, in Australia, I think our tutorial is very important. We have presentations. You know, we have to work. That's very important and very unforgettable for me... (Kim)

However, another graduate from Study 2 felt that teachers did not always provide extra attention to Chinese international students who had difficulties understanding English. It can be argued that such situations may prevent equal opportunities for Chinese international students to participate in discussions. One participant, Sam from Study 1 added that universities should focus more on discussions in the learning environment and on the development of students' writing skills:

I think the university should be more focused on writing skills, analytical skills, and communication skills in terms of talking with your lecturers and discussing in tutorials.... (Sam)

Six of the graduates from Study 2 mentioned that they had learned good group work skills at their host university with one adding that working with local and other international students provided better English and communication skills. Elliot, like several others, would have preferred more lecturer intervention in the teamwork process, as Chinese students often were not familiar with this learning style:

... I wished they would teach us how to do more teamwork, something like this...I'm a Chinese student. It's a different country and a different policy
(Elliot).

One graduate from Study 1 saw the benefits of WIL in developing communication skills; for example, interacting with different people. Furthermore, another student from Study 1 acknowledged the development of communication skills when volunteering to help international students improve their English skills:

I did some volunteer work, and I was working with international students to help them improve their English. And I also think that helped because it gave me more significant communication skills, especially in a group setting, which [is the setting in which] a lot of my meetings and things like that are taking place. (Morgan)

Additionally, six graduates from Study 2 mentioned the need for internships embedded in the curriculum. They felt that internships would give students opportunities to learn certain skills and give them confidence. Interestingly, none of the graduates mentioned that internships would help students enhance their communication skills. Two students suggested that the university should help students find internships in local hotels in Australia, which may be due to the difficulties for international students to find employment in these hotels.

Discussion

Importance of Communication Skills for Job Readiness

This study investigated graduates' perceptions of the importance of communication skills when entering the job market in Australia and China. Only few studies exist about graduates' perceptions of the roles that their attributes play in their careers (Ferguson 2017) and, in particular, the influence of communication skills that were acquired at university.

Furthermore, due to the high number of Chinese international students in Australia, this study contributed to the body of knowledge by investigating and comparing the perceptions of communication skills of participants from Australia and China. Similar to Jackson's (2014) study on graduates' perceptions of their oral communication skills, both Chinese international and Australian domestic graduates found communication to be one of the most important skills in the workplace and to be crucial for their employment. The current study does not discuss the graduates' reflections on their own level of competence. However, there was a tendency among the interviewees to express positive perceptions of their own communication skills, which contradicts contemporary scholars (e.g. Clokie & Fourie 2016; and Tymon 2013), stating that the quality of graduates' communication skills is not at a sufficiently high level. This topic would be interesting to investigate further in future research.

Graduates mentioned that the presentation skills they had practised at university served them in their jobs. It was necessary to be able to present and communicate their expectations of different people

at work. Three graduates from Study 2 mentioned the importance of having intercultural communication skills due to the various cultures represented among the staff and guests in the hospitality industry. This finding was consistent with various scholars (Jackson 2014; Freeman et al. 2009; Knight & de Wit 1995; and Volet & Ang 1998) arguing that cross-cultural communication is important for the international job market.

Reflections on the Development of Skills at University

In general, graduates in both studies agreed that they had learned good communication skills in the classroom. Jackson (2014) agreed that presentations and class discussions assist students in improving their oral communication skills. However, not all students are likely to participate in class discussions, and it is thus important that teachers encourage all students to participate. Most graduates in Study 2 mentioned that they had learned good group work skills during their overseas university studies, particularly through work with groups of different nationalities. However, there seemed to be a lack of direction about how students should work together. Cruickshank et al. (2012) claim that structured interventions by staff to support exchanges among students can help create meaningful group work.

Interestingly, in contrast to Anderson's (2013) and Morgan's (1997) argument that students (in particular accounting students) need to develop their communication skills through special writing classes, only one participant from Study 1 mentioned that students need this type of support. This may be explained by the fact the participants from Study 2 were international students and were supposedly already receiving much English writing skills support from the host university. The university where these participants had been enrolled had adopted an English Language Enhancement Strategy (GELES) that helped international students improve their English language skills before, during and after their studies (Griffith University 2015). It would be interesting to investigate in future research how international students as well as domestic students in various disciplines could benefit from a specific course focusing on writing assignments.

The importance of internships and volunteer work for the development of students' communication skills was confirmed by the experiences of two graduates in Study 1. One student developed her communication skills by interacting with different people. Stephenson et al. (2015) agrees that WIL is a way for universities to help students develop their communication skills. The vast majority of the graduates in Study 2 agreed that WIL was important for their learning in general. Finally, one student from Study 1 had developed her communication skills by volunteering as an English language teacher for international students in a student association. This finding corresponds with the literature suggesting that students' oral and written communication skills may be developed through involvement in student volunteer organisations (Astini 1999; Stephenson et al. 2015; Hoover 2004).

Arkoudis (2014) argues that universities need to have communication strategies not only for international students but also for domestic students, including writing speaking and listening skills. Johnson, Veitch and Dewiyanti (2015) also discuss the benefits of having a framework embedding communication skills across the curriculum. Their example of a communication framework from Murdoch University includes among others communication development and assessment across the curriculum; and professional development communication workshops for staff. Embedding communication skills across the curriculum is complex and requires a collaboration between academics and language practitioners who have a knowledge of how communication skills are being applied in the industry.

Recommendations

Developing Oral Communication and Intercultural Skills

In order to support student development educators need to develop their own oral communication skills (Heron 2019) and ensure that both domestic and international students have equal opportunities to participate in classroom discussions (Valdez 2015). For example, educators may encourage pre-class preparation by sending students study questions to accompany the reading material before class sessions (Tatar 2005). Similarly, methods such as graded participation and cold calling are examples of ways to encourage students to participate in class discussions (Dallimore et al. 2008). Furthermore, there needs to be a greater focus on improving students' written skills. Morgan (1997) and Anderson (2013) both emphasise the importance of teaching students written communication as a stand-alone course. At the University of Study 2, an English Language Teaching Enhancement Strategy (GELES) was an example of a programme helping international students improve their English language skills (both oral and written).

Another relevant recommendation is from Daly et al. (2015), who suggest that universities involved in international education may consider providing a stand-alone intercultural communication course that helps domestic and international students recognise specific cultural differences through active learning. Finally, e-portfolios may be applied to help students reflect on their own communication skills and cultural responsiveness (Dune et al. 2018). Resources for the professional development of academic staff are needed to help graduates become aware of the importance of communication skills for the job market and enhance the participation rate of students in the classroom (Valdez 2015; Heron 2019). For universities to implement the abovementioned initiatives, a framework which embeds communication skills across the curriculum and which targets both domestic and international students is necessary (Johnson et al. 2015; Arkoudis, 2014).

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)

Furthermore, strategies for providing WIL within curricula are recommended for the development of students' oral and written communication skills (de La Harpe & David 2012). Different teaching strategies may help students face challenges during their WIL programmes, for example, preparing for WIL, feedback and mentoring during the programme, and reflections with peers after the programme (Jackson 2014).

Furthermore, international students need assistance from their host universities to obtain internships during their overseas studies. The host university needs to provide English language teaching and knowledge of Australian workplace culture to facilitate international students' access to local companies (Sonnenschein et al. 2018). Student organisations allowing domestic students to volunteer to teach international students the English language would also allow domestic students to develop their professional communication skills.

Conclusions

First, this study contributed to the body of knowledge by investigating graduates' rather than employers' perceptions of the importance of communication skills at work. Furthermore, the study included Chinese graduates' perspectives, which extended the research since not many studies have paid attention to the perspectives of this particular group.

Second, graduates from both studies were mostly satisfied with the development of communication skills at university. Graduates from both studies found class presentations, participation in class discussion and written assignments to be important for the development of their communication skills. Although most students from Study 2 were satisfied with the teaching methods in the classroom, one student mentioned that educators need to provide more explanations to some Chinese students who do not follow their teaching well. Another student felt that universities should focus more on discussion, writing and analysis. Study 2 participants had learned good group work skills during their overseas university studies. However, there seemed to be a lack of instructions about how students should work together interculturally. Learning through WIL and student organisations was considered important for the development of communication skills.

Finally, recommendations were provided to incorporate different pedagogical strategies and structural improvements at universities to encourage students to develop their communication and intercultural skills and to help students overcome challenges with regard to their WIL experiences. Greater access to resources within the curricula, stand-alone programmes and WIL programmes are recommended.

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