EAL Implementation Roundtable Meeting Summary & Tentative Project Principles

Summary prepared by:
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The EAL Implementation roundtable was held on July 4, 2012, 10am-12pm, at the Halpern Centre. A summary of the meeting is presented as follows.

Roundtable Attendee List:

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Paul Budra
Adrienne Burk
Thomas Perry
Sarah Fleming
Lawrence McAllister

Faculty of Education
Kelleen Toohey
Suzanne Smythe
Steve Marshall
Ena Lee

Faculty of Applied Sciences
Rob Cameron
Greg Baker
Maureen Hindy

Faculty of Communication, Art, and Technology
Don Kugler
Robert Kitsos

Faculty of Health Sciences
Margo Moore
Mark Lechner

Beedie School of Business
Andrew Gemino

Faculty of Sciences
Daria Ahrensmeier (Educational Consultant at the Teaching & Learning Centre, proxy for Dr. George Agnes)

Faculty of Environment
Dan Burns
Graduate Studies
Mary-Ellen Kelm

Lifelong Learning
Colleen Wood
Helen Wussow
Wendy Du Steinberg

SFU Library
Elaine Fairey

Student Learning Commons
Donna McGee Thompson
Tim Mossman

Teaching and Learning Centre
Stephanie Chu
Kathryn Ricketts
David Rubeli

Student Services
Tim Rahilly
Louise Legris
Rummana Khan-Hemani
Bing Lee
Steve Birnie
Nancy Johnston
Yusuf Varachia
Lindsay Neilson

Fraser International College
Christa Ovenell

SFU International
Shaheen Nanji

Vice-President Academic, Office
Sarah Dench
Susan Rhodes
Tzy Horng Sai
Introduction

The roundtable discussion was a first opportunity for all present to share EAL-related concerns and challenges, articulate guiding principles for the EAL Implementation Project, and at the same time, confirm some short-term actions and long-term goals. The discussion began with a breakout session where small discussion groups were formed and tasked to address unit-specific and institutional wide EAL related concerns, identify institutional gaps, and begin drafting some guiding principles. As the breakout groups reconvened, it was clear that everyone agreed that the concerns outlined in the report from the EAL review committee were comprehensive and representative. Most people expressed interest in moving forward as quickly as possible with making improvements to existing supports at SFU. There was also agreement across units that the project sets up an opportunity for SFU to be a leader in providing a successful multilingual and multicultural post-secondary education.

Proposed Solutions and Approaches

The larger group discussion began with the point that manipulating or raising admissions standards should not be looked upon as a one-size-fits-all “silver bullet” that solves institutional problems related to students for whom English is an additional language (EAL). While many EAL students are international students, the majority are believed to be Canadian residents and citizens. Because of SFU’s geographical situation, we must acknowledge the reality of the population from which SFU recruits. That is, many students that SFU recruits are and will be multilingual, and may speak English as an additional language. From this standpoint, it was acknowledged during the discussion that SFU’s student population consists of many EAL students, many of whom have learning characteristics that are different from native English speaking students. Those present at the roundtable agreed that these characteristics are not deficits of any sort; indeed, many EAL students are highly successful students. Moreover, it was recognized that EAL students are an asset to the institution. Specifically, they enrich the cultural and linguistic fabric of the university community as well as student experience.

EAL students then are not a “problem” for the university nor are they individuals with learning deficits to be remediated. Instead, what was clear from the roundtable discussion is that there are institutional deficits at SFU in supports provided for EAL students. In particular, SFU lacks a clear, coordinated, and strategic response in providing support to its EAL students. To this end, those present at the roundtable were unanimous that SFU has an ethical responsibility to support all of its students. Providing a supportive learning environment for EAL students is the responsibility of all members of the institution.

How then should SFU respond? Given that everyone in the institution plays a part in supporting EAL students’ success, and that a multipronged, well-coordinated response is imperative, it was suggested that there needs to be stronger pathways or laddering supports established from the period of pre-admissions to graduation. The creation of better pathways will mean more coordination (than what exists currently) among all levels of staff and Faculty, particularly better communication mechanisms among admission staff, student recruiters, university administrators, and instructors. Specifically, many at the roundtable urged stronger, repeated and consistent communication of academic expectations to students and parents in SFU’s recruitment and admission approach. In addition, some have called for
more and improved transitional programs and courses for all newly admitted students. While more coordination seems like additional work in the near future, it was argued by a few people at the roundtable that inefficiencies can be avoided and workload can thereby be reduced in the long run given more and better coordination.

Also raised at the discussion was a need for increased, and a greater variety of, curricular supports as well as more co-curricular opportunities and stronger supplemental learning services. In particular, many pointed out the benefits of having a range of supports such as integrated curricular components as well as a coherent suite of stand-alone communication skills courses in the near future. These forms of support will not only help students in their first year transition into university but also provide bridging preparation for the transition from lower-division to upper-division courses.

Because academic challenges faced by EAL students are not only of a linguistic nature, the foci of supports should go beyond language support and include a range of cognitive and learning skills such as speaking, reading for comprehension, note-taking, presentation, and critical thinking. In fact, developing these skills is believed to benefit all students, not just EAL students. And because integrated curricular supports fall within the domain of Faculty and/or discipline-specific expertise, it was raised that any curricular initiative, and to some extent, extracurricular instructional initiatives (such as tutoring programs) should be driven by instructional faculty and staff members. Specifically, providing students with Faculty/discipline-specific support will give students the skills to transfer communication skills from one discipline/Faculty to another.

Moreover, there was consensus that development of communication skills within discipline-specific content is pedagogically more effective than generic communication skills courses. In discipline-specific courses that emphasize communication skills, students will not only be able to improve their understanding of discipline-specific communication skills, they will also be able to use communication skills such as writing, speaking, and presenting as learning tools to master discipline-specific content. Correspondingly, some attendees at the roundtable have argued that a guiding principle of the project should be that pedagogical and curricular EAL initiatives be led by Faculty. Given the different cultures, disciplinary particularities, needs and constraints of each Faculty, EAL supports and ‘next steps’ should be as discipline-specific as possible. In response to this suggestion, some pointed out that the administration and Faculty distinction is not particularly valuable and that even discipline-specific efforts require an integrated approach, with cooperation amongst instructors and administrative staff members at many levels in the institution.

**Constraints and Challenges to Proposed Solutions**

Implementing Faculty/discipline-specific supports is, of course, not without challenges and constraints. One among some raised during the roundtable discussion is the level of support, resources, and expertise available in each Faculty or department. For instance, in many Faculties and departments, TAs and TMs are the first line of contact for many students, particularly for large classes. However, concerns that TAs and TMs are not adequately trained for university level instruction, particularly in classrooms with a diverse student population, were widely raised. While it was recognized that some Faculty and
course-specific training in addition to professional training opportunities such as the International Teaching Assistant Training Program and TA/TM day hosted by the Teaching and Learning Centre do exist, most agree that SFU lacks sufficient professional training programs for TAs and TMs.

Another challenge raised was that instructional staff members (e.g. instructional faculty members, sessional instructors, TAs and TMs) already feel overworked. Finding time and energy to add or change pedagogical components in their teaching would prove highly challenging. Some have also raised the issue of whether or not teaching communication skills should really be the responsibility of all instructors, on which there wasn’t a clear consensus.

Needless to say, not all EAL-related supports and services need to be discipline-specific. Concerns were voiced about the need for a broad range of extracurricular services that support student learning within a discipline and across disciplines. Finally, the question of how Faculty-specific directions would merge into a university-wide vision and mandate was also posed.

Proposed Guiding Principles

Notwithstanding the constraints and challenges to potential solutions proposed, there was collective agreement on a few guiding principles for the project. These principles are tentative and subject to changes and further deliberation. They are summarized as follows:

1. SFU has an ethical responsibility to support student success for all its students. Providing adequate care for and support to EAL students is no less the responsibility of everyone at SFU.

2. EAL students are an asset to SFU. They are not a “problem” to the university nor are they students with learning or educational deficits who require remediation. Rather, they are students with particular learning characteristics. EAL students enrich the cultural and linguistic fabric of the university community and enhance student experience at SFU.

3. EAL students may require support that is unique to their learning characteristics. However, many learning supports that are beneficial to EAL students may benefit other students as well.

4. All students may face challenges with learning academic language and conventions at university. Indeed, learning how to communicate academically is part of university learning; teaching academic communication is also SFU’s responsibility.

5. Academic language proficiency is multifaceted. Language support at SFU should include competencies that range from speaking, classroom participation, reading for comprehension, note-taking, presentation skills to critical thinking.

6. Providing effective instruction in academic communication should be, to the best extent possible, a discipline-specific enterprise. Nevertheless, general communication supports and services that cater to a breadth of disciplines should be made available at SFU.
7. Providing institutional support to EAL students is a long-term commitment and requires a sustained and coordinated effort.

a) A sustained and coordinated effort entails i) continual long-term planning that is reflective, evaluative, as well as research-and-practitioner-based ii) appropriate short-term actions and iii) use of appropriate expertise.

b) University-wide strategizing and planning for EAL related supports requires thoughtful collaboration and open communication across Faculties, departments and support units at SFU.

8. Because EAL related challenges to SFU are complex and multipronged, SFU’s strategy for supporting EAL students is expected to be multifaceted.

**Institutional, Data, Knowledge Gaps**

Needless to say, the above principles are not conclusive. Not only is there a need to devise solutions and strategies, both long-term and short-term, there remain additional concerns to be considered. In particular, there are gaps in our knowledge of EAL issues and the level of institutional supports currently available. The following are some of the gaps that were raised (as queries and statements) during the roundtable discussion, categorized thematically.

**Is SFU and should SFU be a globalized/internationalized university?**

i) Given that SFU is coming to terms with the reality of its current and prospective student population and a move towards internationalization, would this mean bigger scale institutional changes? Specifically, are we moving towards becoming an internationalized, and a multilingual, multicultural university?

ii) What would a multilingual and multicultural SFU look like?

iii) How do we wrestle with the fact that we are recruiting and attracting students from a population that is increasingly transnational?

iv) What is the goal of the institution? Should SFU assimilate EAL students into the SFU’s environment, with minimal change to existing university instructional and administrative structures? Or should the institution undergo substantive instructional and administrative changes as best as it can to accommodate the increasingly multilingual and multicultural students it currently admits?

**Graduate attributes and student success at SFU**

v) What are SFU’s target graduate attributes?

vi) What does student success mean at SFU and what does it look like?

vii) Are there institutional mechanisms that identify and assess student success? If so, what are they? If not, what should they look like?

**Coordination**
viii) Are there existing institutional mechanisms for identifying and monitoring students, both EAL and non-EAL, with challenges?

ix) Are there existing mechanisms for coordinating and assessing EAL supports and resources? If not, there is a need to create some of these evaluative mechanisms.

x) More communication channels are required to share teaching experiences and exchange pedagogical “best” practices. How can we begin this process?

Data Gaps

i) What data do we currently lack?
   a. Student perspectives are missing from the discussion. What kinds of EAL support do students expect from SFU? How can SFU support student success better?
   b. More perspectives from instructional and advising staff members are needed.

ii) EAL related challenges are not restricted to students. Many instructors who speak English as an additional language may face challenges similar to EAL students. How do we address supports for EAL instructors?

iii) What resources do instructional faculty need, in addition to existing resources, to provide better instruction in a diverse teaching environment, composed of multicultural and multilingual students?

iv) Much of the discussion is centred on undergraduate student experience and learning. What do we know about graduate students? How can we attain some of this information?

Services Gaps

i) Services offered by the Student Learning Commons e.g. the English Language Partners and the services offered by the Writing Services Coordinator are at maximum capacity. Should these services be expanded? If so, what services should be expanded? Have they been evaluated and assessed? Should these services be offered only by the Student Learning Commons?

ii) As mentioned earlier, although manipulating admission standards isn’t a cure-all solution, they should be regularly re-examined and assessed. Open communication among areas in Student Services and Faculty may improve admission processing. How can there be better communication mechanisms across units?

iii) Similarly, academic expectations need to be better communicated to prospective students prior to admission. Communication for SFU’s English Language Requirement does not make it sufficiently clear to students that the requirements listed are a minimum expectation. SFU can better communicate the level of language proficiency needed for academic success to prospective students on its website and admission and recruitment documents and refer students to the appropriate preparatory resources. Improving better communications seem to be easily achievable relative to program and curricular changes. How can we begin this process?
Next Steps

Action steps can be derived from the service gaps listed above. In particular, we will be more than happy to facilitate communication and working processes that aim to improve EAL supports and services at SFU. As is known to all, Sai is working closely with various units and faculties. In addition, steps are being taken to begin collecting student as well as Faculty perspectives. A list of current EAL student supports available at SFU is also being compiled. We are particularly interested to facilitate partnerships and collaborations wherever possible. We also want to help clarify and possibly “unblock” university processes that may be perceived as barriers. Please continue to apprise Sai of initiatives that may pertain to the project. As well, any feedback on the meeting summary should be emailed to Sai at ths1@sfu.ca.