

Conference Report

BALEAP 2015: EAP in a Rapidly Changing Landscape: Issues, Challenges and Solutions - University of Leicester - 17–19 April 2015

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This year the BALEAP biennial conference was held at the University of Leicester and hosted by Phil Horspool and Leicester's English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU). The theme of the conference was 'EAP in a Rapidly Changing Landscape: Issues, Challenges and Solutions' and was a response to the wide range of changes experienced by EAP departments in recent years, including – as the BALEAP 2015 programme states – 'visa issues, growth of public/private provision, distance learning and in-country provision that have affected why, how, what, where, when, and by/to whom EAP is delivered'. The conference was very well attended with over 300 delegates, and in addition to 80 talks there was also a range of workshops, symposiums, plenaries, poster presentations and a PechaKucha.

Many of the presentations I attended were of a very high standard and for the purpose of this review I would like to focus on those sessions I attended which I felt were most relevant to the underlying theme of internationalisation, the marketisation of Higher Education and the challenges presented in terms of change and our students (Prof. Rebecca Hughes), our departments (Maggie Ward Goodbody, Julie Watson, Susie Cowley-Haselden), the EAP/EMI curriculum and the disciplines (Prof. Ken Hyland), and the EAP tutor (Dr Ian Bruce, Dr Alex Ding). I apologise if I do not refer to others who may have spoken about these topics but whose session I was unable to attend, and for any misrepresentations or misreadings.

The opening plenary was given by Prof. Rebecca Hughes, Director of the British Council of International Education, and entitled Navigation in a complex world: English as compass or map? This was a very illuminating presentation and very much reflected the concerns of the conference. One of the themes she highlighted was that English is most likely to remain the world's academic language and this is reflected in the increased proportion of publications in English that has consistently risen, from 64.8 per cent in 1980 to 91.6 per cent in 2015. She also indicated that according to HESA statistics, from around 2011 the number of international students undertaking a UK degree outside the UK for the first time was greater than those taking a degree in the UK and that these numbers were likely to increase steeply. Alongside this, Prof. Hughes highlighted the increasing popularity of international institutions starting to teach in the medium of English and the growing trend to promote the teaching of English in primary and secondary schools in key markets for UK institutions, strengthening the language skills of young people. All of this, she argued, would present challenges to the field of EAP and the question was how could these challenges be met and what 'value added' could UK EAP offer international students. She then went on to talk about where it was anticipated future students might come from which she indicated as being India, Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria and China and that these 'will dominate the global higher

education growth in the next decade’ with the highest growth in absolute terms coming from India, Nigeria and Malaysia.

A further, and potentially controversial point, Prof. Hughes made was that she believed that the ‘deficit model [of the international student] is dead’ – both as a result of the increased internationalisation of the institution, and through a potential lifting of proficiency levels through changes to access to English worldwide. As a result both of this and her arguments above, future students in general would be higher level but would potentially have more complex needs.

The implications of these changes to EAP for students would be that the ‘future of EAP lies in a personalised learning journey’ and although ‘we can predict some of the needs of the study journey we can no longer write the map’. However, she went on to argue that we as EAP tutors ‘can provide the “compass” points’ including ‘good basic study skills’, ‘language improvement linked to real future disciplines and communities’, ‘a sense of confidence’ and I thought interestingly, ‘self-reflection and ability to question others with skill, courtesy, and accuracy’.

Responding to such changes as highlighted by Prof. Hughes – such as language improvement linked to future disciplines – was central to a number of the presentations I attended, for example, Karen Nicholls’ and John Wrigglesworth’s talk on Delivering the discipline-specific pre-sessional that you are responsible for and my own on Criticality, Ideology and Implications for Material Development in EAP for Fine Art and Visual Cultures. Linking language to the disciplines was also a key theme in the closing plenary presented by Prof. Ken Hyland of the University of Hong Kong, his presentation entitled *Innovating Instruction: Specificity and English in the disciplines*.

The background to Prof. Hyland’s presentation was based on the reformation of the Hong Kong education system in 2012 which involved removing a year from students’ school experience and adding it to their time at university; a system more in line with the EU, the USA and China. This gave Hong Kong University the opportunity to rethink its approach to English language teaching and to redesign their courses to focus on ‘English in the discipline’. The purpose of this, he argued, was to recognise disciplinary variation and to this end he conducted a research project identifying the particular language features and discourse practices of the Arts/Humanities on the one hand, and Science/Engineering on the other. He then went on to give numerous examples of the differences in rhetorical approaches between what he termed the ‘soft fields’ and the ‘hard sciences’, and also provided evidence of how subject tutor expectations towards accuracy in writing and attitudes towards drafts varied across the disciplines. All of this, Prof. Hyland argued, reflects the importance of collaboration between EAP tutors and subject lecturers and, again, echoing Prof. Hughes, ensuring that EAP practitioners need to ‘get to student needs as close as possible... [and thus]... equipping students with a new kind of literacy in an academic environment’. To highlight this point, he concluded his presentation by quoting from Ballard and Clanchy: ‘For the student new to a discipline, the task of learning the distinctive mode of analysis... is indivisible from the task of learning the language of the discipline... One area of development cannot proceed without the other.’

I would now like to turn to the actual location where such teaching takes place and specifically to Maggie Ward Goodbody’s presentation on *Emphasising the A and not the E in EAP: Repositioning an EAP centre to face future needs and challenges*.

Maggie Ward Goodbody, Director of the Academic Skills Centre at Bath University, runs an EAP Centre that has recently detached itself from an academic department and is now run as an independent body. The key reason for such a change (which coincidentally reflects Prof. Hughes' observation with regard to the demise of the deficit model), was to provide 'academic and language skills support for all students' (original emphasis) as part of the university's education and internationalisation strategies.

She also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of such a change but emphasised that the advantages greatly outweighed the disadvantages. Among the latter though, she referred to the historic invisibility shared by many EAP departments in the UK (a point also made by Susie Cowley-Hasleden in an earlier seminar) and went on to outline other difficulties such as the institution's perception of the EAP unit as responsible for 'remedial' work, that it was not brought into university discussions, that tutors felt like second-class citizens as they were not 'real' academics and that management regarded the previous unit as an anomaly, something marginal to the institution. In contrast, she argued that becoming a Centre had brought it into academic discussions, so that it was now more involved in language initiatives and presented more autonomy. In a beautifully balanced presentation, she argued that things were not perfect and that there were still future challenges, but it was clear she felt there had been a significant improvement as part of the repositioning of the unit as an academic skills centre outside a department.

Having discussed the issues and challenges relating to EAP students' needs and how institutions such as Bath University have responded structurally to these needs, in the final section I wish to focus on the EAP tutor. The role of the tutor was discussed in a number of sessions I attended: Dr Justin Alam, Language Tutor at the University of Bristol, spoke eloquently about how EAP tutors responded to teaching subject content in a subject matter in which tutors might not be expert, but in which students sometimes are, in his presentation entitled *Teacher anxiety and content-involved EAP*. Dr Alam highlighted the anxiety that tutors sometimes felt and discussed solutions offered both by course designers and tutors themselves. Another session that discussed the role of the EAP tutor was the Symposium on Purposes held by Susie Cowley-Haselden, Julie King, Steve Kirk, and Dr Alex Ding in his talk on the Practitioner and Identity. Dr Ding, Lecturer at the University of Nottingham, in a thought-provoking talk, argued that EAP had colluded in its own marginalisation within the Institution and that there was an impression within academe that 'EAP is theoretically vacuous'. Further, in terms of the practitioner, he stated that 'we need a good idea of the methodologies and ideologies that have shaped EAP... [so as to]... question and reaffirm our values'. This would, he argued, allow the practitioner to consider 'what transformations we aspire to both individually and collectively' and at the same time 'take advantage of our peripheral position.' It is for this reason, he argued, that 'We need to engage with scholarship so as to make our presence felt within the university and the HE community.'

This theme was developed by Dr Ian Bruce, Senior Lecturer at the University of Waikato, who spoke on *Teaching the next generation of EAP lecturers*. The purpose of his presentation was to consider the training and developmental needs of future EAP practitioners. What I found particularly interesting about Dr Bruce's talk was the presupposition that such preparation 'was necessary to be positioned as academics within the mainstream of universities rather than as support service providers.' He gave a number of reasons for this, including, and echoing, Prof. Ken Hyland that 'students' capacity for language use is shaped by disciplinary epistemologies and genres used for communication.' Dr Bruce argued that the key questions were: When do you become a researcher; What

research areas relate to EAP; What is your identity as a researcher; and How do you use your profile as a researcher to be recognised within the university.

It is clear from the posing of such questions that this is where the strength of meetings like the BALEAP biennial lie, and that there is clear scope for reflection on the changing nature of internationalisation and the concomitant effect that this will have on the marketisation of the UK HE sector. These changes will inevitably present us with challenges, as discussed at the biennial, in terms of our students, our departments and ourselves as EAP tutors and I very much look forward to these discussions at future BALEAP PIMs and other related events.

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