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The development of a concurrent English - IT Programme for International Students.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the IT Department and the Centre for English and Other Languages at the Waikato Institute of Technology (CEOL) decided to merge two existing programmes, the Certificate in Advanced English, (CAE) and the Certificate in Computing and Information Technology, (CCIT) and run them together, so that Non English Speaking Background (NESB) students could study two six month certificate level programmes concurrently, rather than consecutively. There would be a separate NESB occurrence of the CCIT programme, and the combined one-year full time programme would be designed as a bridging course into mainstream study at Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) level. It was hoped that this development would provide new horizons for NESB students in the area of computing education.

This paper will describe the rationale behind the programme, and the process of its development, with an emphasis on curriculum issues. It will evaluate the programme's effectiveness as it nears the end of its first year of existence.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE CAE/ CCIT CONCURRENT PROGRAMME.

2.1 Certificate in Advanced English

The Certificate in Advanced English is a nationally accredited full time competency-based 36 week programme equivalent to level 4 on the framework, which is designed to improve students' level of academic English and to teach tertiary study and assignment skills. Students can choose to study one semester only of this programme, depending on their entry level of English, and for the purposes of this concurrent programme, it was decided to accept them for one semester of full time study at equivalent IELTS 5.

2.2 The Certificate of Computing and Information Technology

CCIT is a competency based full time 16-week programme, based on level 5 modules derived from the NACCQ New Zealand Qualifications in Information and Communications Technology, which is designed to prepare students for entry into the BIT. It was developed

	CAE	Hours	CCIT	Hours
Semester 1	CAE Reading/Writing CAE Listening/Speaking	6 5	AM100 Maths HF100 Hardware Fundamentals SP100 Software Packages SP110 Software Packages Tutorial	2 2 2 2 1
Total Hours Per week		**11**		**9**
Semester 2	CAE Reading/Writing CAE Listening/Speaking	6 5	IN 100 Internet MA100 Multimedia OS100 Operating Systems US100 User Support NM100 Network Management Tutorial	2 2 2 2 2 1
Total Hours Per week		**11**		**11**

Table 1 Structure of the Combined Course

in-house at Wintec, and is based on the NACCQ PC drivers licence (New Zealand Qualifications in Information and Communications Technology paragraph 11, 9th Edition). Entry requirements for the programme are sixth form certificate in 4 subjects or equivalent. It consists of 9 courses.

3 RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPING THE CAE/CCIT PROGRAMME

3.1 Educational Issues

The IT Department had identified that some NESB students were struggling with mainstream study, and that they had problems with coping with the IT technical language input, with listening to lectures and with assignment work.

The CEOL was well aware of the NESB students' need to learn strategies for mainstream study, and felt that a content focussed approach would allow for increased motivation and faster learning. As well, this was seen as a way to move students into mainstream study without needing an IELTS score. The single minded focus on "passing" IELTS can be detrimental to preparation for mainstream study, as students are not willing to spend time learning study and research skills when these are not tested in the exam. However, an IELTS score on its own, without cultural knowledge and study skills, is often not sufficient for success at tertiary level (Deakin, 1997) (Holmes, 2000).

3.2 Marketing Issues

Both Departments saw this programme as a way to establish a niche in the market, and to encourage enrolments into Wintec. The IT Department saw this course as an opportunity not only to build student numbers in the short term, but also to provide a pool of students who would be committed to further IT study at Wintec once they had graduated from the programme.

The CEOL saw this as a way to allow students into a mainstream programme with a lower English level, and felt that this would be a very popular option for international students.

4 PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE PROGRAMME

As with any initiative, the process of developing this concurrent programme was slow and often difficult. The first attempt at running the programme failed, as the institution had no experience with the issues involved in running programmes across faculties, and there was no infrastructure set up to accommodate this kind of initiative. Thus, curriculum and administrative issues were not resolved in time for the course to begin.

However, the course did begin in Semester 2 of 2002. The focus of this paper is on curriculum development rather than administrative issues.

4.1 Curriculum Planning

Several meetings were held at which the division of CCIT courses into semesters one and two was decided, and mainstream IT tutors provided their course outlines, and sample assignments and tests. From these, a selection of different mainstream assessments was chosen to be the focus of the CAE programme.

The IT courses remained relatively unchanged from their mainstream equivalents, while the content of the existing CAE programme needed to change markedly to reflect the linguistic requirements of the CCIT programme. The skills taught in CAE remain the same, as do the type and number of assessments, but the order of events and the content has evolved to be very different from the general CAE course.

4.2 IT Staff Training

During the process of developing CAE/CCIT, IT staff who were interested in teaching on the programme attended a Certificate in Adult Learning and Teaching (CALT) course entitled "Teaching and Learning with NESB Students". This course was designed to help the tutors to identify issues round teaching NESB students in their current classes, and to suggest some teaching techniques for supporting and promoting these students' learning. Practising English teachers taught the course, and the training received by the IT staff proved to be invaluable during the delivery of the programme.

5 ONGOING DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Inter-disciplinary cooperation

As the course has progressed, some of the IT tutors have worked closely with the English tutors to modify class materials and handouts to make them more accessible to NESB students, and to identify areas where the students lack cultural or linguistic knowledge. There have been many areas of overlap. For example, the SP100 course requires students to complete a mail merge of names and addresses into a form letter, and the NESB students had problems with name order (family and given name) and with setting out both names and addresses. English support has been available to help them in this area. Similarly, there has been linguistic support with the language for clear instructions for writing a simple user manual, as well as the usual focus on written discourse for essay type questions. Assignments that require interviews and report writing have been closely mirrored and supported by the CAE tutors.

This support has been organised by the course tutors from both Departments working together, and in most cases there has been good cooperation. While there is no expectation for IT tutors to become English teachers, it is important that all tutors involved in this kind of programme have a willingness to participate and communicate, and a flexible attitude to their materials, course content and assessments.

5.2 Student feedback

The evolution of the course has also been driven by ongoing student feedback, which has been incorporated both in three weekly informal journals as part of the English assessment, and in more formal open-ended course evaluations which are held at the end of every term. Students have been asked to comment on their areas of difficulty and also to give suggestions for improvement. Though not always positive, student feedback has been useful and constructive, and has resulted in changes in both timetabling and course content.

For example, students identified that three hours was too long for the Maths course, as they had already covered this material in their home countries, and they were learning only English names for known concepts. Thus, the course was reduced to two hours per week, and the extra hour was given to a weekly tutorial session, which is currently being run by a Chinese peer tutor. Informal feedback on this tutorial session has been mixed, and it too may need to be modified after more formal feedback has been received.

In terms of course content, students identified that they wanted more "pure" English, rather than too much focus on IT material, and as the course has progressed the English classes have become more focussed on non-IT material.

There has also been feedback about teaching style. Predictable comments have been made about speed of delivery and the need for more explanation, and there has been consistent feedback that one tutor needs to lecture less and provide more opportunities for classroom interaction with the material. The student feedback gives the lie to the notion that all Asian students are rote learners who do not engage with the course material; indeed, they have indicated that they want to learn, are keen to understand concepts fully, and are not satisfied simply to pass the tests and move on.

6 POSITIVES AND PROBLEMS

6.1 Problems

This programme represents a melding of four cultures, Asian and Western, and also IT and English. While Asian and Western cultural differences are frequently explored and discussed, the culture clash between the IT and English departments approaches to teaching and student management has also provided challenges for the development of this course. Issues over flexibility versus a more system driven approach to student management have occasionally caused interdepartmental problems. A mutually respectful and cordial relationship between the two coordinators of the programme has been crucial in working though areas of difficulty, and the coordination of this programme in its infancy has been a time consuming task.

Asian and Western cultural clashes have been both predictable and unexpected. There have been predictable issues with the necessity for students to be autonomous and responsible learners, and also with plagiarism and particularly cheating in class tests. Students have reported difficulties with understanding what constitutes important vocabulary, with learning it, and with being able to apply it appropriately in test situations. In this respect, the competency based nature of the course has been very helpful, as they have had chances to attempt tests two or even three times. As the course has progressed into the second semester, students are having less difficulty with test taking, despite the fact that the content has become more technical, and the number of ICT courses has increased. There has been a corresponding decline in cheating in tests.

One unexpected area of confusion was an understanding of competency-based assessment. It became apparent that the students did not understand that there were no final exams in this course, and that if they passed the tests and assessments they had passed the course. This concept proved difficult to grasp, but once its implications had been clearly understood, motivation to pass each assessment markedly increased.

6.2 Positives

The most positive aspect of this programme has been the remarkable improvement in the students' linguistic and study skills, and consequently their motivation. The first occurrence of this programme started with fifteen students. Four dropped out early on, as the work load and content proved too much for them, but the other eleven all returned after the long Summer break, one directly into BIT study. This is a remarkable retention rate, and is strong evidence of the success of this programme and the motivation of the students. In addition, the students enrolled in the NESB occurrences have enjoyed a much higher success rate than their New Zealand counterparts.

The programme has also been educationally exciting for the English tutors, as they have had an opportunity to both learn some basic IT skills and terminology themselves, and to initiate and develop a content focussed programme which supports mainstream study in one area. This concept of concurrent enrolments is developing throughout Wintec, and will soon move into both Business and Nursing Departments. It is the strong opinion of the English tutors that concurrent programmes represent the best pathway into mainstream study for NESB students.

In addition, the opportunity for interdepartmental cooperation has been beneficial to both departments, and to the organisation as a whole. In a large organisation such as Wintec, departments can become both isolated and isolationist, and this programme allows a framework for developing communication between areas that are traditionally considered disparate.

7. CONCLUSION

The merging of the CAE and CCIT programmes into a concurrent enrolment for NESB students has been a new horizon in information and communication technology education at Wintec. As the programme nears the end of its first occurrence, it has proven to be successful both in attracting and retaining students, and in helping them improve their language and study skills for mainstream study. It has also allowed for interdepartmental cooperation and development of skills and knowledge. This programme will be extended into other areas at Wintec in the near future.

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