



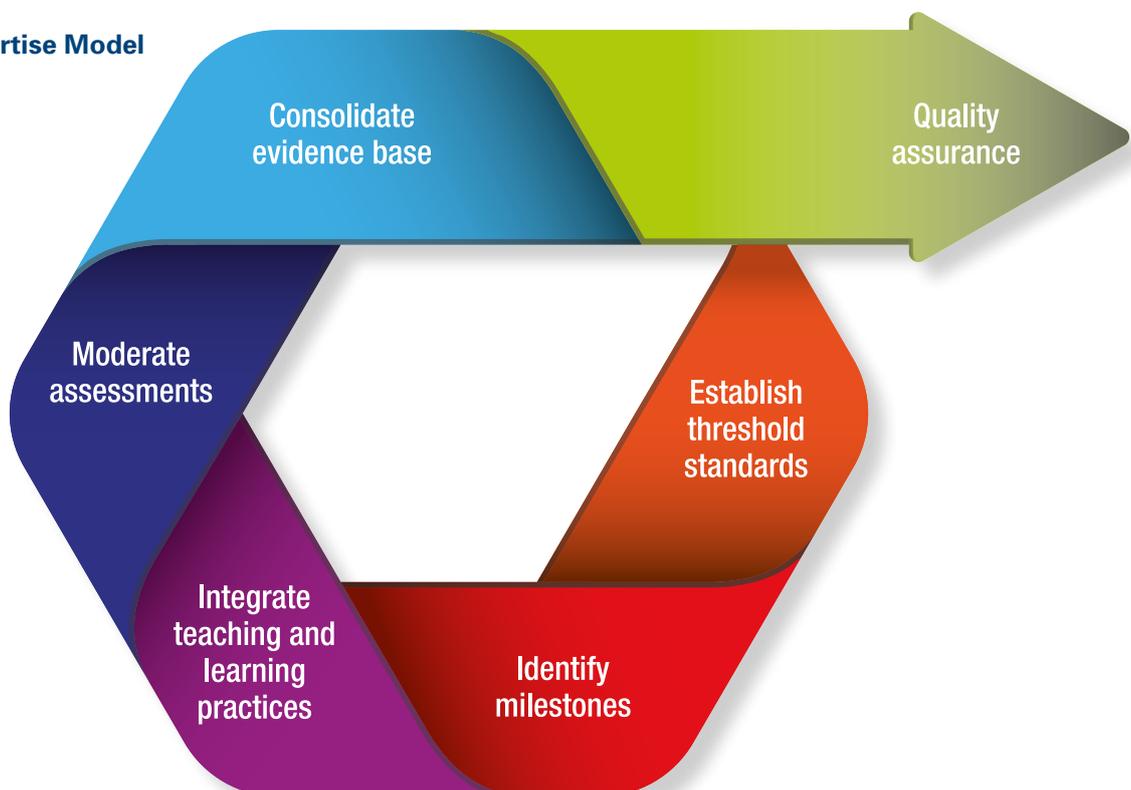
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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Graduate communication skills have been the Achilles heel of Australian higher education for over a decade and continue to be of concern. So far, universities have attempted to address these concerns by offering a range of initiatives and interventions. Most of these fall short due to the difficulty in providing evidence that graduates have achieved threshold standards in oral and written communication skills.

Seeking to strengthen evidence-based approaches, we created the **Distributed Expertise Model** that aims to assist universities in developing, assessing and demonstrating graduates' communication skills.

Distributed Expertise Model





Key questions we asked

- How do DVCs (Academic and/or Learning and Teaching) and program leaders know that their graduates have attained threshold oral and written communication skills?
- Within programs, what takes place as part of the curriculum design to assure communication skills are developed and assessed across a student's course?
- What are the practices that have high impact?
- How is the impact on student learning evaluated?
- How scalable are the practices?
- How can institutions demonstrate to external stakeholders that their graduates have achieved the communication skills for further study or employment?

The **Distributed Expertise Model** utilises current expertise available in universities in developing a whole-of-program approach.

Within the model, high impact practices for student learning are identified. These practices apply to all students and are both sustainable and scalable across the program. In addition, these high impact practices strengthen the evidence-base and inform quality assurance processes.

A whole-of-program approach

Two main findings from the project led to the implementation of a whole-of-program approach.

- 1 The highest impact on student learning is when communication skills are included in disciplinary assessment tasks throughout a student's program.

The **Distributed Expertise Model** offers a way for universities to provide evidence that graduates have achieved threshold standards required for communication skills.

It incorporates six action points for strengthening the evidence-base for graduate communication skills within a **whole-of-program** approach.

It is readily adaptable to all programs and aims to assist universities in strengthening their evidence-based approaches to the **teaching and learning** of communication skills.

- 2 Universities know that their graduates have achieved threshold standards of communication skills because of the cumulative milestones that students must meet before they can graduate.

Six action points

- 1 Establish threshold standards
- 2 Identify milestones
- 3 Integrate teaching and learning practices
- 4 Moderate assessments
- 5 Consolidate evidence-base
- 6 Quality assurance

The Distributed Expertise Model

Principles

- Responsibility for assuring graduates' threshold standards for communication skills is distributed across the teaching program.
- The development and assessment of students' communication skills take place through cumulative milestones within their program of study.
- The cumulative milestones provide evidence of learning progression that leads to the achievement of threshold standards.
- Leadership is critical to success, both at the institutional level and at the program level.
- Ideally, university-wide policy outlines requirements for program coordinators.

Actions

- Identify where the development and assessment of communication skills will take place as part of mapping course learning outcomes.
- Identify specific strategies for the development of communication skills throughout the program. Ideally, include a low stakes written assessment task early in a core unit.
- Determine actions to be followed if students do not meet milestones.
- Prepare, and make available to all students, a range of contextualised support materials.
- Include communication skills as a criterion within rubrics for all assessment tasks.
- Encourage students to maintain an e-portfolio (or similar) during their program to show evidence of threshold levels for oral and written communication skills.
- Provide professional development where required.
- Incorporate communication skills into internal and external moderation practices.

Why is this model high impact on student learning?

- The model utilises current expertise from across the university to provide a whole-of-program approach.
- It incorporates assessment of communication skills in disciplinary teaching and students know the threshold standards.
- There are implications should a student fail to achieve minimum levels at key milestones across the program.
- The practices are sustainable, scalable and apply to all students.
- Practices are integrated into the quality assurance processes of the program.

Program specific approaches

Top and tail approach

- Used in generic programs at the undergraduate level; for example, Bachelor of Arts or Science.
- Students' levels of communication skills are assessed in both the foundation (or a core) unit and the capstone (or common final) unit.

Professional practice approach

- Used for programs such as Nursing, Teaching and Engineering, which have external professional accreditation standards that include communication skills.
- Students' levels of communication skills are assessed throughout the program in the identified milestone units.
- Students should, ideally, achieve minimum threshold standards prior to enrolling in professional practice placement/s or work integrated learning options.

High entry-level approach

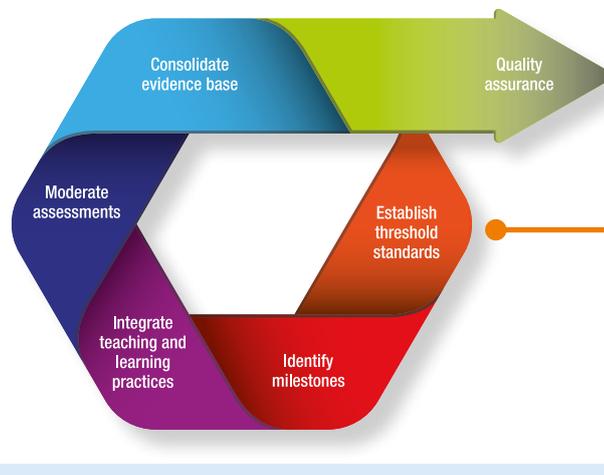
- Used when high entry-level requirements are in place in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs; for example, Law or Medicine.
- Students' levels of communication skills are assessed in the first year of study in the identified milestone units.

Higher degree by research approach

- Prior to entry, students demonstrate high level of communication skills using a variety of evidence.

Program coordinators know that their graduates have achieved the threshold standards of oral and written communication skills because of **the cumulative milestones for communication skills that students must meet before they can graduate.**

Unpacking the Model



ESTABLISH THRESHOLD STANDARDS

What

What are the minimum levels of communication skills we require our students to demonstrate to be eligible for graduation?

When

Establishing threshold standards needs to be included in early curriculum design processes and quality assurance cycles.

Who

The program leader and team, in conjunction with the course advisory committee and/or accreditation bodies, define the types of communication skills required and articulate the levels of mastery required by each student in order for progression and graduation.

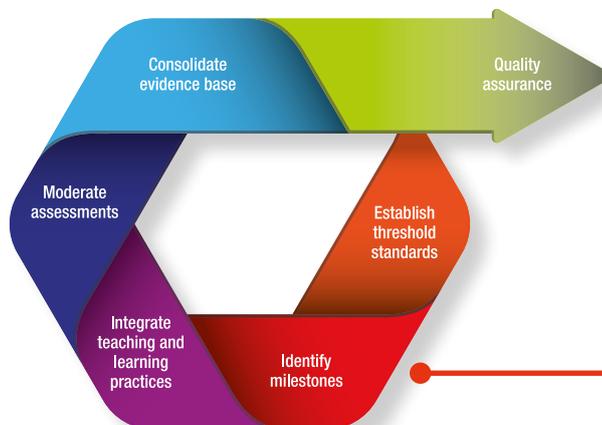
Actions

- Identify and agree to threshold oral and written communication skills for graduates to be able to pass their degree program.
- Design levels or thresholds of achievement that are specific, assessable and measurable.

- Confirm the threshold is consistent with graduate attributes, program learning outcomes, industry feedback, relevant professional accreditation requirements, and other requirements including the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF).
- Make the threshold visible through approvals, policy documents, staff consultation workshops, and all student information. Include details within course and unit information for students.
- Ensure the process is aligned with established course review cycles to embed, formalise and make explicit the requirements for graduate communication skills.

Evidence

- Course design and review documents including mapping matrices.
- Policies that include statements about minimum levels.
- Student information including program learning outcomes that refer to required levels of communication Skills.



IDENTIFY MILESTONES

What

What level of communication skills is necessary for student progression and at what points during the program should they be demonstrated?

When

In the Top and Tail Approach, milestones are likely to be at the commencement and end of the course; whereas in the Professional Practice Approach, they may be included in each year level.

Who

The program and/or course leaders and full teaching team, having established minimum threshold standards, identify the points during the program where students are required to meet specific standards.

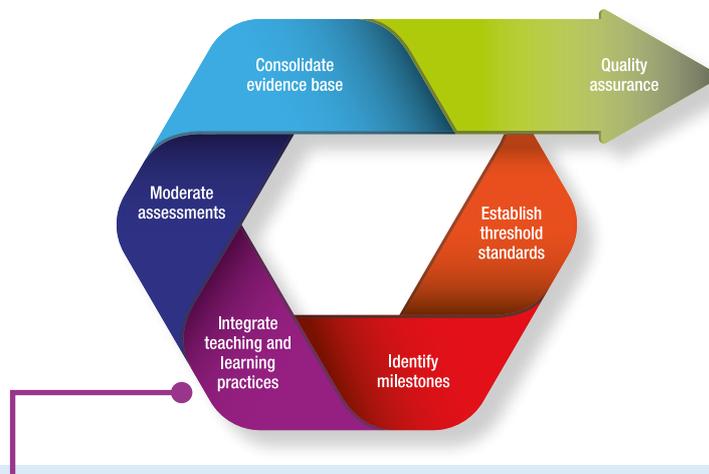
Actions

- Establish points throughout the course when milestone/s must be demonstrated.
- Design milestones as summative assessment task/s that act as a 'hurdle' requirement for communication skills.
- Identify unit/s in which these tasks will take place.

- Map the curriculum to ensure formative or developmental assessment tasks assessing communication skills precede the milestone/s.
- Map all tasks on Course Outcomes documentation.
- Include support features that are available to students at risk of not meeting the threshold.
- Ensure all information related to milestone requirements is made available to students at the commencement of their program.
- Develop policies, procedures and mechanisms to manage student support and additional interventions for students who may be at risk of not meeting the milestone.
- Ensure all staff in the program are aware of these milestones.

Evidence

Course design that includes mapping of milestones for communication skills meets all requirements of program and institutional committees. Minutes of meetings capture all details. Audits of assessment tasks are noted and support measures are documented.



INTEGRATE TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES

What

What are the teaching and learning approaches that will support students to achieve the communication skills learning outcomes?

When

During curriculum design of the unit.

Who

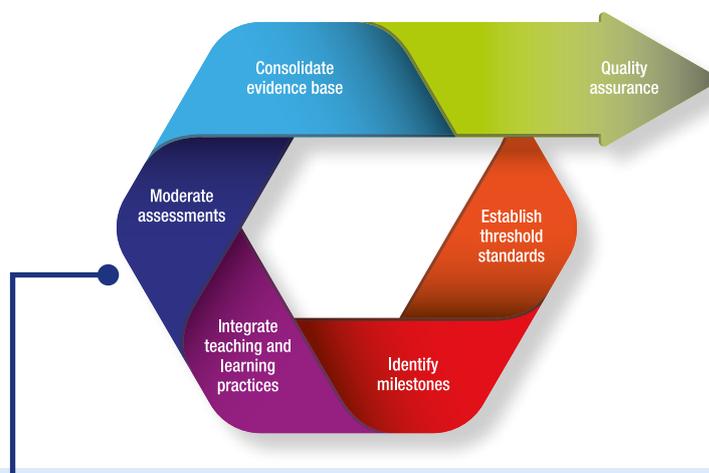
Despite specific units being nominated for milestones, Head of Program, Unit Coordinators, disciplinary specialists, literacy specialist/s, and librarian/s should all be engaged in the teaching and learning processes.

Actions

- Map curriculum, teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks against the threshold standards for oral and written communication skills.
- Develop assessment rubrics and criteria.
- Establish partnerships and develop co-teaching opportunities between teaching academics and literacy specialists.
- Budget for professional development activities to upskill academic staff as required.

Evidence

Teaching and Learning Plans outline requirements linked to the integration of communication skills within course design. Assessment rubrics and criteria are published.



MODERATE ASSESSMENT

What

What agreement is there regarding minimum levels of communication skills in the assessment?

When

At the end of each teaching period and during scheduled benchmarking activities.

Who

Head of Program, Unit Coordinators and teaching academics.

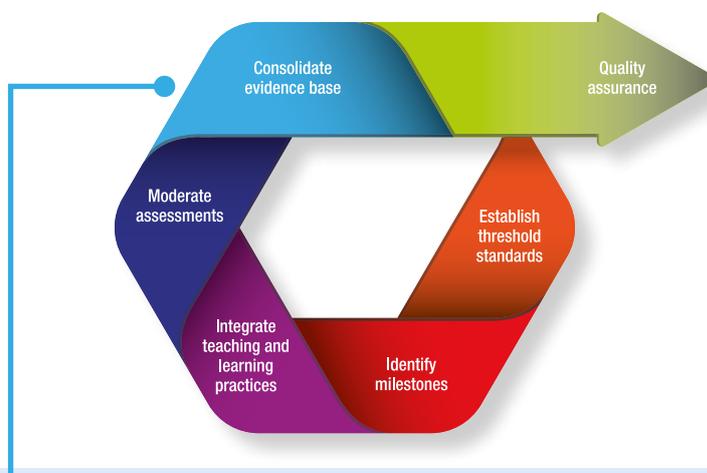
Actions

- Ensure that all policies related to assessment and moderation state the process for moderating milestone assessments and include requirements for communication skills more generally.
- Collect samples of formative and summative assessment items from across the program and review how oral and written communication skills are integrated.

- Ensure the range of tasks is related to Course Learning Outcomes. If specific tasks are required by industry, check suitability.
- Review assessment rubrics and criteria linked to communication skills, and benchmark all aspects with suitable partners.
- Organise blind marking of milestone assessments to establish and maintain consistency of standards.
- In conjunction with teaching academics and literacy specialists, create an assessment bank and feedback examples that demonstrate types and levels of oral and written communication skills.

Evidence

- Assessment and Moderation Policies.
- Benchmarking Policies and agreements.
- Moderation reports outlining outcomes of moderation and blind re-marking processes.
- Minutes of Board of Examiners or Assessment Appeals Committees demonstrating moderation.



CONSOLIDATE EVIDENCE-BASE

What

What evidence can we collect to demonstrate how communication skills are developed and assessed and to evaluate whether these practices are effective?

When

At the end of each teaching period.

Who

Head of Program, Unit Coordinators.

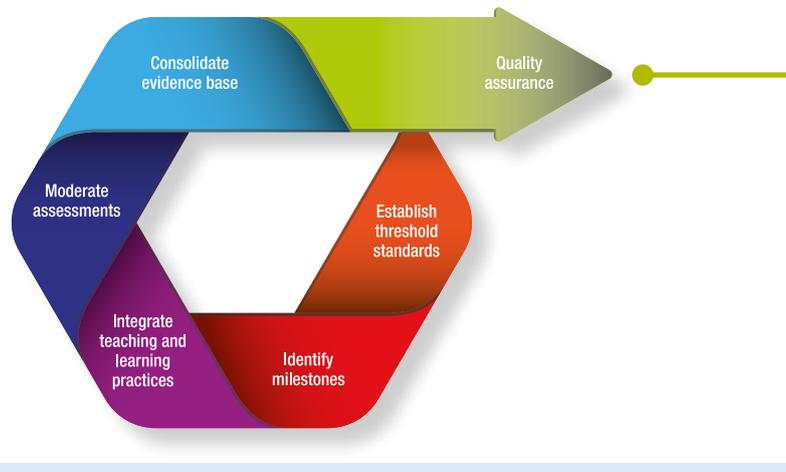
Actions

- Establish a process for the collection and review of materials related to course design, assessment, moderation, benchmarking, student support and interventions, and teaching and learning practices for communication skills.

- Engage all staff in professional activities that facilitate the sharing of successful strategies, tools and methods for developing and assessing communication skills.
- Review practices to ascertain if they are sustainable and scalable across units and the program.
- Report regularly to staff, findings and recommendations regarding moderation and benchmarking activities.
- Update internal requirements for communication skills as external contexts change, including professional requirements.

Evidence

Evidence is collated and available for internal Academic Board Reviews and external evaluators. Policies for the collection and review of teaching materials are in place.



QUALITY ASSURANCE

What

What can we do to improve practices across the program to ensure that our students have graduate level oral and written communication skills for future success?

When

Ongoing

Who

Institutional Leaders, Faculty leaders, Heads of Program and all staff.

Actions

- Update all processes for course review and design to include explicit approvals for the development and assessment of oral and written communication skills.

- Monitor performance data and moderation reports to ascertain whether students who do not meet the threshold for communication skills are able to graduate.
- Act on feedback from students, employers and staff.
- Provide regular reports to leaders, staff and students outlining the actions arising from quality assurance activities and a timeline for implementation.
- Review and assess the impact of initiatives designed to assure graduate communication skills at the end of each teaching period.

Evidence

Following this model, university leaders have AQF mapping, along with performance data to support claims of graduates' standards of communication skills.

The **Distributed Expertise Model** offers a way for universities to provide evidence that graduates have achieved threshold standards required for communication skills.

- Responsibility is shared by teaching staff who understand what is required for students to achieve minimum standards.
- University leaders, generally the DVC Academic or DVC (or PVC) Learning and Teaching, oversee policy compliance, hence there is institutional ownership.
- Through their engagement on advisory groups, industry bodies and professional associations have confidence in graduates' communications skills.
- Program teams are involved via mapping of skills, establishing where development of oral and written communication occurs, and devising assessment tasks for appropriate units within the program. As this takes place across the program, strategies and tasks are sustainable and scalable. They are visible to students within weeks of enrolment and, as a result of feedback, remain so during their study.
- Threshold standards are detailed in program documents and specific unit outlines, along with actions required if the standards are not attained. There are implications if students fail to meet minimum threshold standards. Generally, students will fail the unit and cannot progress until a pass is achieved.
- As the development and assessment of communication skills is integrated within a student's program of study, all learning and teaching is contextualised to their program. This is regarded as best practice.
- A range of contextualised strategies and support measures is available for all students, and are linked directly to assessment tasks.
- Assessment tasks and marking are moderated both internally and externally.
- There is a strong evidence base of students' achievement of the required communication skills because it is mandatory that they meet minimum threshold standards at key points throughout their course.



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