
A challenge for DWU's administrative leadership to facilitate student proficiency in English

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Abstract

This research explores the various problems in English that are faced by undergraduate students at the Department of PNG Studies, Divine Word University, Madang campus. The researcher further makes enquiries into Divine Word University's 30 Year Strategic Plan and the issue of English proficiency influencing the progress of the Strategic Plan in achieving its objectives. In this research different methodologies were used to obtain accurate data, review literature and provide a critical analysis. The outcome of the research poses a challenge for the leadership of DWU. The research recommends processes that DWU's leadership could consider in order to successfully achieve its aims.

Key words: English as a Second Language, proficiency, Strategic Plan, Divine Word University, *Scaffolding Academic Literacy* pedagogy, literacy skills

Context of the research

The higher education sector in Papua New Guinea (PNG) has been well researched before and after independence. Research documents, academic papers and reports of national committees have been produced by commissions, external consultants, missions, workshops and seminars. There are many suggestions to address those issues in Higher Education in PNG and there is a high degree of consciousness of problems and limitations. However, many of those suggestions are not converted into practical action. As a result, there is a wide gap between pronouncements of visions and their implementation, (United Nation Development Program, 1993). In this complex context with the increasing number of grade 12 students, the challenge is for Divine Word University (DWU) to meet international academic standards as a PNG institution of Higher Education. The challenge faced by the university's administrative leadership is to facilitate the development of English proficiency in its students.

The purpose of this research is to explore the proficiency of students in the English language in undergraduate programs at DWU as an important factor contributing to the academic standards at the university. This research is important because it contributes to the body of knowledge about the quality of the PNG system of education. It contributes to the theoretical understanding about the quality of primary and secondary schools academic programs, and it has implications for the quality of education in Papua New Guinea's universities.

Despite an increased interest in PNG's Higher Education issues, there is little empirical research which has explored the links between primary and secondary education's quality of teaching English, its influence on the quality of academic programs at universities and excellence of graduates coming from PNG's universities. Yet the successful employment of graduates coming from DWU has been identified as significant to PNG's social, economic and cultural development. DWU's graduates are expected to be proficient in English, to contribute to the growth and development of PNG as empowered individuals and leaders in both their own communities and the wider society.

In addition, an extensive search of the research literature has identified a challenge concerning the career development of young graduates in PNG society due to their lack of proficiency in English. The research will contribute to the growing body of knowledge about students experiences related to their knowledge of and proficiency in English and may encourage the Faculty of Arts at DWU to offer additional programs in the English Comprehensive Classes to ensure successful careers for its graduates. Student participation in additional academic activities aimed at improving their English should increase their opportunities for employment. It will also contribute to a better understanding by students themselves about their own career development.

The aim of the research is to investigate literacy skills in a particular group of students from PNG Studies Department who have enrolled at the university and took additional studies in English.

Literature review

In 1996, DWU launched a 30 year Strategic Plan to make DWU a community of scholars, a place of excellence, with quality of research, teaching, learning and community service. DWU's strategic plan is divided into three decades. The first decade aimed to establish a foundation for DWU to move from an institution to a good university, the second decade to become a great university and the third decade will reinforce the international standards of DWU. Currently, DWU is implementing its second decade of the strategic plan.

Foundation documents were produced, including vision, mission statement, objectives and Charter. Governance and administration were established. Academic and non-academic staff were appointed. Educational programs began. Learning resources (including library and Information Technology) were developed. The student services department was formed. DWU policies helped staff to manage academic matters and physical resources. (DWU Strategic Plan).

In the second decade of DWU development the university administration wants to achieve the following objectives:

- Commit Divine Word University to total quality assurance in all its activities.

- Educate future leaders who are professional and committed to serving the needs of the region by promoting the cultural and ethical values of an open, democratic society. There will be an emphasis throughout DWU’s educational programs on the values of unfettered critical and creative thinking.
- Equip graduate students with a philosophy of life to effectively manage an ethically and culturally sensitive changing environment and future in their professional and private life.
- Develop DWU as an international academic community of active partnerships in research, teaching, learning and community service with regional and international institutions of higher learning that is able to sustain its own activities independently.
- Recruit, admit, and retain an outstanding, regionally based student body. DWU needs to continue the strong pattern of recruitment, admission and retention of an outstanding, regionally (South Pacific) based student body (DWU Strategic Plan, p. 9)

Figure 1: DWU’s strategy from being a good university to becoming a great university

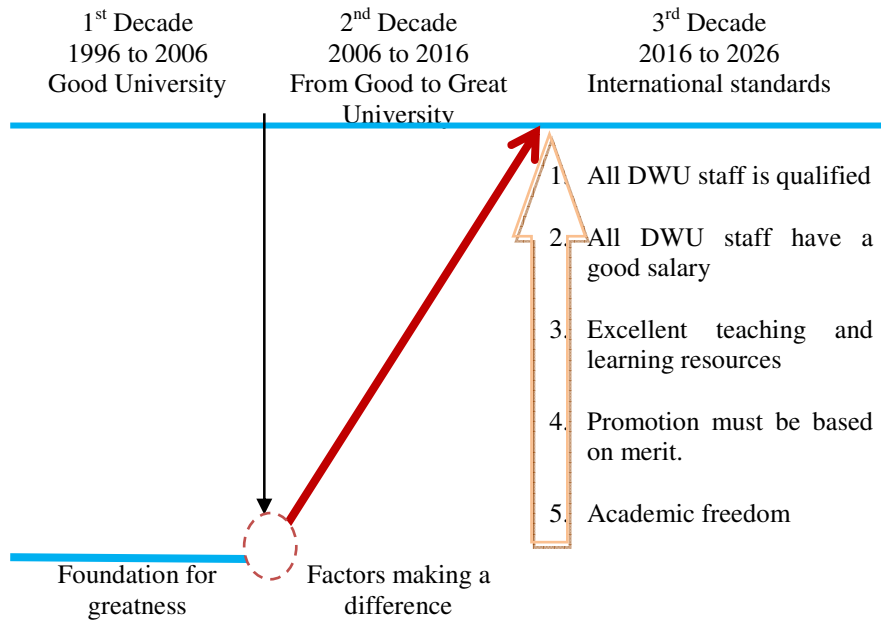


Figure 1 illustrates DWU’s strategy from being a good university to becoming a great university. DWU’s strategic plan outlines the framework to achieve these objectives by ensuring that conditions for quality are met. Consequently, to achieve these above objectives, the university undertook in 2006 a number of specific leadership and ‘management activities, academic programs and processes leading to its quality of research, teaching, learning and community service, thus creating educational and financial sustainability for the next

decade' (DWU Strategic Plan, p.9). It is the university leadership's deliberately chosen strategy to establish conditions which are necessary to create a unique DWU culture. 'These activities will focus on creating conditions for quality research, teaching, learning and community service. They underpin the goals and objectives for each staff member, department, division, campus and faculty of DWU.

The five conditions are:

1. *Academic, administrative and ancillary staff members are qualified.* Through the staff development program and the recruitment of distinguished faculty members from all over the world.
2. *Academic and administrative staff need to be employed in one full time job at DWU to live comfortably with their families.*
3. *Presence of adequate physical, electronic and administrative support.* Academic staff and students have to have access to well-equipped laboratories, library with up to date textbooks, research monographs and journals. DWU endeavors to bring about the employment of modern information technologies and the use of state-of-the-art physical and operational technologies.
4. *Appointment and promotion must be based on merit.*
5. *Academic freedom, where constructive criticism of the University and government is encouraged.'* (DWU Strategic Plan, p.9)

DWU plans to meet international academic standards as a PNG institution of higher education by creating necessary conditions for a University culture that ensures quality in PNG's context. DWU needs to cater to the diverse needs of the student population with very limited financial recourses and often by concentrating efforts on the local community and economy.

Research findings and academic discussion

A total of eleven (11) out of twelve (12) students from the department of PNG studies, Faculty of Arts (FA) participated in the in-depth interview, six (6) of the interviewees were female and five (5) were male. One student was not interviewed due to communication misunderstandings between the participant and the researcher.

Direct questions were raised with the interviewees, where there was room for expansion on a particular question. All interviews were recorded with a voice recorder and later transcribed. Therefore, quotations in the research findings are the actual words used by the interviewees. Names of the interviewees will not be disclosed as they were advised before each interview that their identities remain confidential.

The same sets of questions were posed to all interviewees. However, questions were expanded during the course of the interview when the interviewee's

responses unlocked avenues for further questions and discussions. The first question raised with all students was: What sort of problems do you have in English? Following is a sample of responses.

'My perception is I am okay in English, I can write in English, read English, also be critical on how to read scientific writing.'

'English is my first language at home so I have no problems in speaking English.'

'My problem with English here is the grammar.'

'Well, English is basically a third language for me, I have my mother tongue, and then pidgin and then to English so its like really hard in writing a good complete sentence or something like that so I like, I was in school, like I could not write good English.'

'Actually I do have problems speaking fluent English, I don't have much but its easy writing but to actually speak you know I find it hard to have that confidence to express myself and think. That's one of the problems I have in English.'

The researcher interviewed the Dean of the Faculty of Arts (FA) who commented on proficiency in English of the students adding that English was a second and or a third language for many students. For many reasons, the level of competence in the English language varies greatly among students in the Faculty of Arts. First, students use different languages at home: English, vernacular(s), Tok Pisin, or Motu, so some have more, and some have fewer, opportunities to practice English. Second, students come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds at home and at school. The more education their parents have and the better their schools, the better command of English they tend to have. (Dean, FA, interview, DWU, 2010.)

Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin who worked in PNG for many years at Kaindi Teacher's College in Wewak, University of Papua New Guinea and DWU had identified the low academic level of students. Though English is the main medium of communication in education 'it is a real issue because for most PNG students English is their third or fourth language', (McLaughlin, 1997). On a national level, this has been the main problem for low academic literacy standards of PNG students.

During the course of the interview with the students, many showed facial expressions and long silences which indicated to the researcher that they had a problem in understanding the question and explaining themselves. The researcher had to explain and provide more supporting information on the question. The question was expanded by the interviewer asking: do you have problems in areas of writing, speaking and or reading and comprehending English? Please explain.

Most responses were not on a personal level, such as using the word 'I' or 'my'. Sixty per cent of the respondents answered by using 'we', 'they' or 'us' which referred to the class; their responses were on a general level. These answers indicated to the interviewer (researcher) that the particular problems mentioned were shared or were common problems among the class. The following are some samples of students' responses:

'Sometimes during presentations, the grammar use and some of the words are not explained properly, probably the presenter does not even know what she or he is even presenting.'

'We took English classes in year one, but we students could not understand because the lecturer did not make it interesting.'

'I think the main problem with many students; the experience is how they comprehend the English, they think in their language and try to translate to the class in English.'

'Writing is a very big problem for us.'

'They tend to find it hard to understand English and how it is simplified, they find it hard to simplify the terms and relate it into for example if it's a new idea or theory, they find it hard to relate it into the PNG context, this is a problem for most students.'

'Some don't speak well and some speak well, some don't write well and some write well so when we are in groups, that becomes a conflict.'

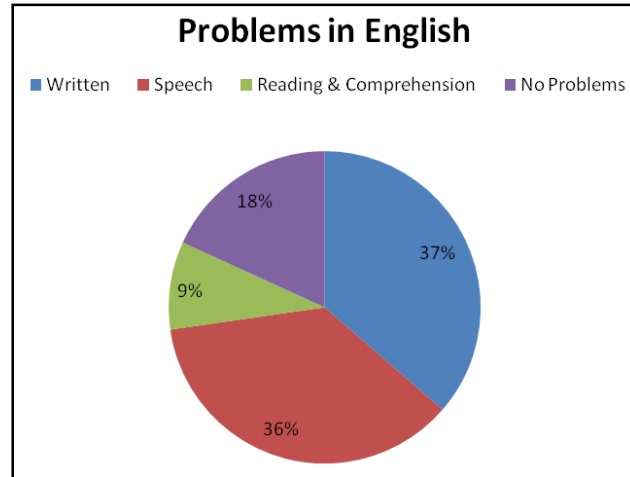
These responses have indicated various problems in abilities of students to use English, in speaking, reading, comprehending and writing. A few of the responses also had incomplete English sentences or used Tok-Pisin (as underlined in the following examples).

'...translate to the class in English, that's how me understandim ol go rong.' (means that's how I understand where it is wrong)

'..yes English em bikpla problem' (means English is a big problem)

Most participants indicated that they had problems in writing (37%) or speaking (36%) English. Some students (18%) stated that they had no problems in using English. Only 9% of interviewees admitted having problems with reading and comprehension.

Figure 2: Problems in English use faced by the sample population



To speak, read, write and learn in English has been a struggle for many Papua New Guineans where English is either a second or third language. The English language is generally taught in primary and secondary schools by national teachers 'who themselves have a tenuous grasp of it', (McLaughlin, 1997). The majority of students entering universities tend to 'have serious problems in English', (Herman, 1988; Lynch, 1980, McLaughlin, 1991 in McLaughlin, 1997). One of the contributing reasons as McLaughlin (1997) asserts for problems in English 'is that students perceived and used English as an institutional language rather than a preferred medium of transaction and thought', (McLaughlin, 1997).

Through interviews, the researcher also explored students' day-to-day dialogue with friends, colleagues and lecturers inside and outside of the lecture room. Following are a few responses from students:

'We use English, but most girls use pidgin to express like when they are angry they use pidgin or like when they are hungry. But for school work and stuff we use English like when we want to discuss about an assignment but for emotions we use pidgin, yeah most of them find that they express themselves better in pidgin than in English.'

'If there are six of us and five of them are speaking pidgin and you speak in English they will be like yu wonem kain white meri na u toktok lo English (translation: who are you a white woman and you speak in English?) I think this is one problem in English because you want to fit into the society.'

'Sometimes lecturers do not encourage us to speak in class, only the expats do. So there is opportunity but some students they assume they do not want to speak.'

'When it comes to group discussion, I have noticed that students who do not speak really well in English they do not like to take part in discussions.'

'Outside of the classroom we use tok pisin because that is what everyone is speaking.'

'Sometimes lack of confidence and I cannot stand up and though I know the answer I just sit down and let the others do the talking or sometimes I am afraid that my answers might be wrong and others might think wrong of me.'

'I have a problem for answering questions in class and for me; it's a lack of confidence.'

'I know the answer but I cannot put it into correct English and so I do not talk in class.'

'Sometimes I can answer a lot of questions in class but I am concerned you know of what others will say about me, like they will say like she is trying to act smart, so I rather keep it to myself and know the answer.'

These responses have brought out themes related to the PNG society and its culture in general, on accepted Papua New Guineans' daily interaction with others around them. Most students expressed their concern on what others will think of them when they speak up in a foreign language and in this case English. This is an individual challenge as confidence is viewed as a masculine feature in a male dominated society such as Papua New Guinea. However, gender is not the problem here; it is the language construction; knowing, understanding and speaking English. 'Linguistic differences can produce cognitive differences' (Trudgill, 1983 in McLaughlin, 1997) but 'this is debatable' (Brown, 1980:143, in McLaughlin, 1997). 'None of the contemporary vernaculars in PNG is currently capable of promoting a Western technological process', (McLaughlin, 1997). For example, 'an English speaking native could make use of English expressions or terminology using 30,000 to 60,000 words which is 20 times the size of some vernacular languages' (Lancy;1983 in McLaughlin, 1997), including PNG vernaculars.

This further implies that English speaking nationals have wider possibilities of thinking and speaking because of the availability of so many words the English language provides as compared to Papua New Guinean languages. This may explain why students do not speak out in class, not only that they are nervous but also because they cannot formulate their thoughts into English as the size of their English vocabulary may not be sufficient to formulate a complete English sentence. Also they may not have the academic skills to develop an argument and support it with appropriate evidence.

At university or tertiary level, students who have had twelve years of schooling (out of which nine is in English) are expected to be able to speak, write, learn

and to develop an argument and support it with appropriate evidence in English. The research indicates that lecturers are facing a challenging situation as students do not possess the required academic literacy level in English. Following are comments by lecturers in the FA on students' English proficiency:

'Students do not write well in English. The majority have low levels of writing English, and some have very low levels. Most students speak English better than they write English, but they often lack the vocabulary and the organization to be able to articulate themselves well. (Interview DWU staff member, 2010)

'Their capitalization, grammar, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary are atrocious. Their ability to organize an essay is poor. Moreover, their ability to present a neat document is often poor.' (Interview DWU staff member, 2010)

'Because the students have insufficient skills, they often submit assignments by copying from documents or cutting and pasting from the Internet, and they become guilty of plagiarism.' (Interview DWU staff member, 2010)

Associate Professor Denis McLaughlin, who is teaching in PNG, South Africa, the Philippines and the Mauritius and lecturing at the Australian Catholic University, argues the following:

Language problems occur because students are educated in a language in which their teachers themselves lack facility. Moreover, in the Papua New Guinean context the learning problems with English are associated with a lack of equivalence between the concepts in the academic discourse and the students existing conceptual framework. Learning problems in English are more about concept acquisition than translation. ...When expatriate academics teach Papua New Guineans, there is often a cultural dynamic at play that is inconsistent with that operating in Western universities (McLaughlin, 1997).

A question was also raised regarding oral examinations. The researcher wanted to find out the general perceptions of the students on face-to-face oral examinations. Currently, the department of PNG studies does not offer oral examinations unlike in the past. It was noticeable in the responses of students that in order to perform well in oral examinations you would need to be a confident user of spoken English.

'For those who are fluent in speaking, I guess it would be suitable for them but for those who cannot express themselves, they tend to find it hard to put words in order, its hard for them....'

Another student's perception was quite the opposite, *'I see it as a good way of students improving their English....it is balanced, like for others you write*

essays and for this you practice how you speak it.' Other students were not too sure whether oral examinations would be good or bad or whether it would assist students spoken English, and chose not to answer.

As difficult as it may seem for a Papua New Guinean to master a foreign language, the Department of PNG studies in the Faculty of Arts is well aware of this challenge and has set criteria and benchmarks on how to go about addressing and minimizing this problem. The faculty introduced the English Comprehensive class as 'a temporary measure to meet the needs of current students until more rigorous measures are put into place', (Dean, FA, interview, 2010.)

The research also sought views from students on the implementation of the English Comprehensive class that began this year - 2010. One student thought she did not have problems in English; however after attending the English Comprehensive class, she admitted that she realized she did have problems in writing. It was '*an eye opener*' for her (Student interview, 2010). Others who did attend the English Comprehensive class, when asked what they thought about the class, commented positively, '*it's good*', '*it depends*', '*it would be a bonus*'.

The researcher also identified a new paradigm associated with gender and students' attitude as a response to the pilot project in the faculty. All female students interviewed seemed to be more appreciative of the English Comprehensive class whilst the male students' responses were more negative. One student commented '*it's a waste of my time, I already have so much to do*'. Another who had not yet attended the class commented, '*if it is formal, I will attend, if it is not formal, I will not attend, I already have a lot to do, my timetable is full*.' Only one male student was positive towards this initiative, though he had not attended a class. He stated, '*It would be a bonus for me*.' The female students looked more on the positive side of things and with comments such as: '*it was fun*', '*we debated, I have never debated before, I was shy but learnt to speak out in public*', '*I always thought I was good in English until now, I made very little but important mistakes, it was good*.'

As this initiative is only a provisional measure to assist students, the FA have also set benchmarks and requirements for their students to do simple personal activities to help themselves such as reading, writing book reviews, speaking English at all times, ongoing debates of ideas, review feedback on assignments and many more basic activities that individuals can do on a personal level. Furthermore, some staff members from the Faculty of Arts have explored the possibility of having a Teaching and Learning centre to assist students within their faculty. In support of this a staff member in an executive position in administration made the following comments.

'I would support an initiative of anybody to improve people's oral and written skills in English. I would like to think it was optional or voluntary or not part of the coursework in terms of enhancing skills. I would

support anybody with the drive and enthusiasm to do extra things.' (Interview administrative staff Y, 2010).

A second executive administrator at DWU, made the following comments as a response to this challenge of low academic literacy standards:

'Staff have to cope with the problem and not set up a whole new structure. There is a growth process taking place and it is our job as educators to lead them forward. We all have to play the role and accept the reality and challenge. It is each educator's role to be responsible.' (Interview administrative staff V, 2010).

A third senior executive of the university stated that:

'For the last few years, I was very concerned about the proficiency of English of our students especially when they came to my office for interviews or other matters. I always took the opportunity not only to talk to students about their own affairs but to seek students views on different matters related to PNG or the rest of the world. In many occasions, I was surprised that students had little knowledge about affairs in Australia, Europe or United States and most importantly they were not able to maintain an academic discussion or debate and some of them did not have the capacity to support their own statements. It became clear to me that we at the university have serious problems with the level of student's proficiency in English.' (Interview administrative staff Z, 2010).

The researcher asked the interviewee if the university has a strategic plan to deal with this challenging situation. The interviewee stated *'unfortunately, I am not aware of any Academic Board or Cabinet's decision which will suggest that the university has a well crafted strategy to effectively raise the proficiency of English at the university.'* (Interview administrative staff Z, 2010).

The researcher further explored with the interviewee the effectiveness of DWU's Strategic Plan and its role in dealing with students' inefficiency in English. The outcome of the interview confirms that *'DWU's Strategic Plan does not provide an effective strategic approach for the university leadership to immediately deal with this issue.'* (Interview administrative staff Z, 2010).

The literature review and the findings suggest that DWU does not have a strategy in place to deal with this new paradigm of students entering the university with very low literacy levels in academic English. The results of the research provide evidence that students at DWU are not aware of their own lack of proficiency in English and not many academics and administrative staff are effectively engaged in providing solutions to enhance the academic literacy level of students.

DWU will need to review its academic programs and strategy to meet the international academic standards as a PNG Institution of Higher Education. It is a challenge for DWU's administrative leadership to facilitate the

development of new strategies which will effectively address the low academic level of students' proficiency in English.

The research also confirms that PNG's primary and secondary system of education does not prepare students adequately for university education. The researcher using different research methodologies was able to establish that DWU needs to review its academic strategies as well as the university's Strategic Plan if the university wants to maintain its international academic standards.

When DWU developed its 30 year strategic plan in 1996, this plan did not make any reference to address the low academic literacy level of its students. The researcher was puzzled why the authors of the strategic plan could possibly overlook the important factor which contributes to the international standards of the university which is student's proficiency in English.

The researcher was able to establish that the university had been running its own secondary school (Divine Word Institute; matriculation studies) which was the feeder of students to DWU. All staff lecturing at the university were also lecturing at the secondary/matriculation level. Therefore, students recruited from their own secondary school to university were academically well prepared. In 2000, the university administration made a strategic move to close the secondary school and since 2002 students were enrolling from other provinces of PNG. Since that time, the university started to experience a new paradigm of students entering the university with good grades on certificates however, with low levels of literacy in academic English. The diagram below summarizes DWU's Strategic Plan and the research findings.

This research suggests that low English literacy levels of students could hinder the progress of the university in reaching its international academic standards. The research provides evidence suggesting that any temporary measure will not resolve this problem but only a permanent well crafted academic strategy supported by sound leadership will resolve this problem. The problem identified in this research if not addressed, will slow DWU's progress to reach its international academic objectives by 2016. The research further established that DWU's second decade Strategic Plan does not foresee this challenge. It is recommended in this research that the DWU Strategic Plan should be reviewed and to the current existing five factors which contributes to create quality of education at DWU, a sixth factor should be added. The researcher suggests that the sixth factor could be: *high quality in proficiency of English across all faculties at the university.*

This research also found that students at the university developed scotoma (intellectual blindness) to their own abilities and quality of written and spoken English. This situation provides a new challenge for DWU administrative leadership to make students conscious about their own strengths and weaknesses in literacy at the same time develop a strategy to motivate students to enhance their proficiency in English.

Conclusion

The following suggestions are made as actions which the DWU administrative leadership could consider to facilitate student proficiency in English.

DWU leadership could establish an English unit for first and second year students. Each department could add English as a unit to their academic programs for four semesters.

DWU leadership could consider promoting strategies to teach 'English across the curriculum'. This means that even in mathematics or accounting classes it would be important to teach relevant English expression and take this into account during assessment activities.

It will be advisable for the administration to review its recruitment processes and raise the standards of enrolments across the university and only enrol students with A and B grades (A = high distinction & B = distinction)

DWU leadership might like to explore the possibility of entry exams before students can formally enrol at the university.

As of 2011, DWU will establish an Online Studies Centre which will allow staff and students to enrol with different universities and take academic programs not offered by DWU. This online centre could be used by DWU to register all first and second year students in an English program with an overseas university.

DWU has advanced ICT technology and students have easy access to computers. Therefore, the DWU leadership could consider purchasing software for learning English and install in all computers. Students would be obliged to enhance their academic literacy level, by doing assignments from this software identified by each faculty and forward to lecturers for corrections and marking, or to avoid additional marking by faculty members, assignments could be marked using software.

The DWU leadership could consider making a well crafted intervention to its current academic programs by applying the *Scaffolding Academic Literacy* pedagogy. The researcher would like to recommend the following strategy which the university could consider and implement.

- DWU administration could invite staff from the University of Sydney to offer in house training programs as a part of DWU staff development to enable all academic staff to understand and to incorporate the techniques or the methodology in every core unit of study across all academic programs.
- Each faculty would have to identify core units to which the intervention will be applied and make necessary review of those units thus to allow for incorporation of the *Scaffolding Academic Literacy* pedagogy.

- Offer this methodology to currently existing units in undergraduate programs over four semesters.

Unfortunately this research was conducted at only one PNG university and one campus of DWU with PNG students, though its findings suggest that there are serious issues in regard to low academic literacy rates amongst students elsewhere. Results of this research support the notion that all students whose first language is not English must be able to provide evidence that their spoken and written command of the English language is adequate for the programs for which they have applied. This requirement is specified by all DWU's faculties in order to ensure that the academic progress of students is not hindered by language difficulties and that students are able to integrate socially while studying at DWU. It would be strongly recommended that those responsible for recruitment and enrolment of students are aware of the entry requirements and ensure that only those who can provide evidence of proficiency in English are enrolled.

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