

# CONFERENCE PAPER PRESENTATION



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## TITLE OF PAPER

**MEETING THE DEMANDS OF A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PROFESSIONAL  
WRITING COURSE FOR TERTIARY STUDENTS**



## PRESENTERS

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## CONTENT OF THIS DOCUMENT:

1. Presenter biographies
2. Paper abstract
3. Presentation notes
4. PowerPoint slides

**Presenter 1**

**Name:** Dr Ang Pei Soo

**Biography:**

Pei Soo Ang, PhD is a Senior Language Teacher at the Faculty of Languages & Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. She has 20 years of ELT experience in Malaysia which includes a 14-year involvement in ESP courses at tertiary level. Her areas of research interest include professional discourse, discourses of disability, critical discourse analysis, social semiotics and multimodality.

**Presenter 2**

**Name:** Ms Rema Menon

**Biography:**

Rema Menon is the Head of the Language Unit at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. She has 30 years of experience in ELT at tertiary level. Her research interests are teaching and learning writing and speaking skills, assessment and English for Specific Purposes. She has co-authored two books on report writing for business and professional purposes.

**ABSTRACT:**

This presentation focuses on the curriculum of a professional writing course run by the Faculty of Languages & Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. There is a demand for a multi-dimensional communication course to equip future employees with professional writing skills, communications strategies, digital technologies knowhow and simultaneously nurtures employable characters. The curriculum provides many opportunities for students to work on projects that develop a range of professional skills. Preliminary findings from the course feedback survey and student journals indicate the course is able to help prepare these undergraduates for the challenges and demands expected at the early stage of their careers.

**PURPOSE OF PRESENTATION:**

- Share how the course design of a multi-dimensional advanced professional writing course is aligned with institutional demands to prepare undergraduates for early career workplace writing
- Evaluate course feedback received to gauge achievement of course learning outcomes.

## PRESENTATION NOTES:

### 1.0 Introduction

What distinguishes English for Specific Purpose (ESP) from General English (GE) is not the existence of a need but the awareness of it (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). And thus, in designing a compulsory English course for advanced users of English (CEFR B2/Low C1), the Faculty of Languages & Linguistics, University of Malaya (a Malaysian public university) faces the challenge of meeting the multi-dimensional demands of a holistic ESP course. Hence, this paper concerns how we have aligned the course design of an advanced professional writing course for tertiary students with the various institutional demands to equip undergraduates with employable skills particularly writing skills for the workplace. We also evaluate the course feedback received over 3 semesters to gauge the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

### 2.0 Background to study (motivation)

#### 2.1 Issue of graduate employability and the Graduate Employability Blueprint



Reports have shown that of most graduates from the Malaysian public and private institutions of higher learning (IHL) are employed within six months after graduating; however, among those who are not, many of them are likely to come from public universities (Sapaat, Mustapha, Ahmad, Chamili, & Muhamad, 2011). In 2013, out of 212,830 graduates, 53,282 (25%) particularly those with backgrounds in social sciences, business and law were unable to find jobs (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Subsequently, a 2015 tracer study report by the Ministry of Education stated that only 58% of 273,373 graduates were employed within six months of graduating. Another 18% opted to pursue their studies while 24% were unemployed (Shanmugam, 2017). Generally, these suggest that about a quarter of graduates are not able to secure jobs within the first six months after graduation. Effort needs to be put in to ensure all graduates possess employable skills and are better prepared for the workplace.

**Key Factors (Unemployment)**

A. JobStreet 2017:

1. Unrealistic salary/benefits expectations
2. Too picky about the job/company
3. Poor character, attitude or personality
4. Poor command of the English language
5. Poor overall communication skills

B. MOHE (2009) Graduates Tracer Study System:  
English Language, ICT, communication and entrepreneurial skills.

C. Hanapi & Nordin (2014) Employers and the Industries:  
Lack of soft skills: positive work ethic, communication skills, team working, decision-making and leadership skills,

**Graduate employability (2)**

The Blueprint states that IHLs should:

- produce competent graduates in order to fulfil national and international manpower needs with 75% of the graduates employed in their relevant fields within six months of their graduation.
- accept responsibility for ensuring that graduates have the necessary profiles for employability, be responsive to the growing demand for more employable graduates to continue to help propel the various industries with creativity and innovations.
- CRITICISM: give priority to the needs of the industry, IHLs take full responsibility for preparing students for the demands of the workplace (Yoong et al. 2016)

Why does unemployment happen among fresh Malaysian graduates? Three main studies are referred to here. The first is a *JobStreet* Malaysia 2015 survey. *JobStreet* is Asia's leading online employment company which facilitates in matching and communicating job opportunities between jobseekers and employers. In a 2015 survey, *JobStreet* Malaysia highlighted the top five reasons of unemployment of fresh graduates in Malaysia which were (JobStreet, 2015):

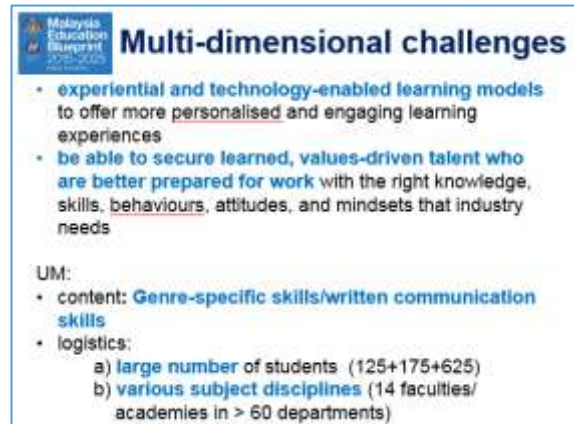
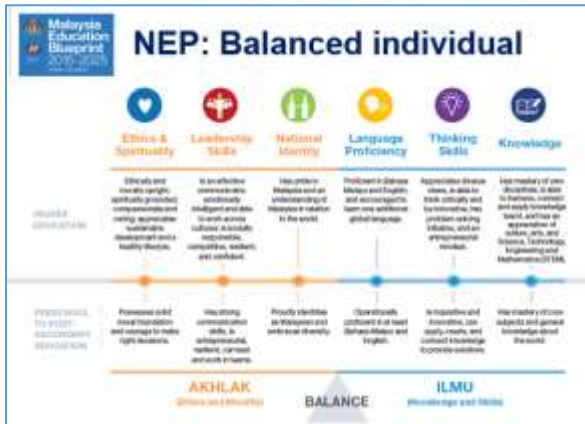
1. *Unrealistic expectations of starting salary and benefits: Fresh graduates expected a salary of RM5000-RM6000 which would enable them to lead a comfortable modern lifestyle. JobStreet has since come out with an expected salary guideline for fresh graduates for the various disciplines.*
2. *Too picky about the job and company: Graduates associated their qualifications with the status of prospective employers*
3. *Poor character, attitude and personality*
4. *Poor command of the English Language*
5. *Poor overall communication skills*

The above list suggests that unemployment has little or no correlation with content knowledge but rather the attitude, mindset, personality and ability to communicate particularly in English. Another report referred to is the Graduate Tracer Study System Report (2009). The report found that about 81.7% of the unemployed graduates stated that they were in a dire need of additional trainings. These included trainings in English language skills, career development, ICT, communication and entrepreneurial skills (Graduates Tracer Study System by Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). In terms of report and research with employers and the industries, Hanapi and Nordin (2014) reported that the industries claimed graduates from institutions of higher learning lacked soft skills which include positive work ethics, communication skills, teamwork, decision-making and leadership skills. The above studies have predominantly linked unemployment with the lack of language and communication skills and the overall general soft skills, instead of academic, knowledge and technical skills. Thus, the incorporation of soft skills in course design should be given a significant amount of consideration.

To create sustainable employability as well as build human capital in Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education has drawn up a Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017). It states that IHL should 'produce competent graduates in order to fulfil national and international manpower needs with 75% of the graduates employed in their relevant fields within six months of their graduation' (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012, p. 1). The blueprint focuses on boosting the level of graduate marketability as well as fulfilling the need for professional and skilled manpower which will contribute towards national development. Not only are IHLs expected to accept responsibility for

ensuring that graduates have the necessary profiles for employability, but they must also 'be responsive to the growing demand for more employable graduates to continue to help propel the various industries with creativity and innovations'. The ministry seems to also have tasked institutions of higher learning with preparing students for the demands of the workplace and fulfilling the needs of the industries. For this, the challenge has been made top-down to all institutions of higher learning.

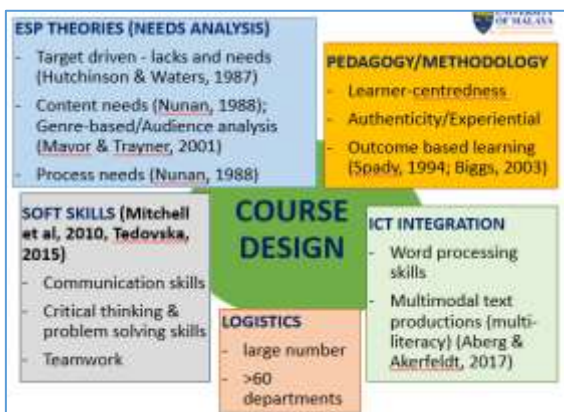
## 2.2 Stipulations by the National Education Philosophy



In line with the stipulations in the Graduate Employability Blueprint, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) was developed with the aim to produce holistic and balanced individuals in the country's aspiration of becoming a high income nation. MEB emphasizes the balance between both knowledge and skills as well as ethics and morality. The student development aspirations in MEB are anchored on six primary attributes: ethics and spirituality, leadership skills, national identity, language proficiency, thinking skills, and knowledge. The MEB also specifies the teaching and learning approaches should emulate experiential and technology-enabled learning models to offer more personalized and engaging learning experiences. Ultimately, it should be able to produce learned, values-driven talents who are better prepared for work with the right knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and mindsets that the industries need. And so, in developing the course design, these attributes and teaching and learning approaches have to be considered and incorporated.

## 3.0 Literature Review and Course Design

This section expounds the theoretical foundations that informed the course design.



### 3.1 ESP and learning theories

Needs analysis (NA) is typically taken as the first step in course design. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p. 121), NA is 'the process of establishing the *what* and *how* of a course'. And so, with reference to the national agenda imposed upon Malaysian institutions of higher learning, we refer mainly to **target needs** i.e. what learners need to do in the target situation and **learning needs** i.e. what the learners need to do in order to learn.

Different researchers have employed different terms in describing learner needs. Nunan (1988) for instance proposes two processes that are involved in NA:

- a) **Content needs:** Includes linguistic / lexical / discourse election and sequencing of topics, grammar, function, notions and vocabulary
- b) **Process needs:** Selection and sequencing of learning tasks and experiences and strategies to be deployed by students and teachers.

In addition, (Holliday & Cooke, 1982, p. 124) propagated the 'ecological approach' (EA) in ESP. They explained that the ESP ecosystem is made up of the relevant characteristics of local institutional management and infrastructure to enable it to co-exist with the classroom culture. The EA, derived from the communicative curriculum, is a process model where an ESP course is seen as a dynamic mesh of negotiated purposes, methods and evaluation produced by, and interacting with, a milieu of attitudes and expectations of all the parties involved. There is a need to accord the co-existence of all the competing but interdependent elements of the system, and to work with the system (Holliday & Cooke, 1982).

As such, both the centrifugal and centripetal factors are considered in this course designing process. Centrifugal factors are those factors in the context of the situation that can influence teaching and learning (examples are the available facilities, existing education and administrative policies) (Appacutty, 1999). The centripetal forces are the factors that do not significantly change and are quite pre-determined in a given context (Appacutty, 1999). The examples in this case would be the kind of language structure, technical aspects of a genre i.e. the language skills designated/pertinent in writing professional documents and performing in the real world. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) termed factors as '**necessities**' to refer to the type of needs determined by the demands of the target situation; what learners have to know in order to function effectively in the target situation.

### 3.2 Outcome-based education (OBE)

To address the above factors, the course curriculum should focus on the intended course outcomes. Outcome-based Education (OBE) is approach that centers on what is to be learned and how it can be learned based on the envisioned outcomes (Kudlas, 1994). The basic tenets of OBE are also shifting the traditional focus of educational activity from teaching to learning; skills to thinking; content to process; and teacher instruction to student demonstration (Tavner, 2005). It is a visible and observable demonstration of learning consisting of three elements that are combined together: knowledge, competence and orientations (Biggs, 2003; Spady, 1994). A demonstration of learning at the end of a learning experience is expected to measure achievement and performance.

Other than developing the linguistic abilities of students, nurturing employable characters or soft skills is a pertinent expected outcome in higher education. These include character traits, attitudes and behaviors (Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010; Tevdovska, 2015). Soft skills are 'intangible, non-

technical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator" (Robles, 2012, p. 457). With reference to the lack of characteristics of Malaysian graduates, the soft skills to be instilled include communication strategies, critical thinking and problem solving skills, teamwork skills and social responsibility. Thus, the course design here includes:

- a. Communication skills – ability to present ideas clearly, effectively and confidently appropriate to the audience and ability to use technology in writing and presentation
- b. Critical thinking & Problem Solving – identify/analyze problems in complex and vague situations, justified evaluation, find ideas/alternative solutions
- c. Teamwork – build good relations, interact with others and work effectively to achieve objects, understand and interchange roles between that of a leader and member.

Therefore, to achieve a holistic course which integrates of both content and soft skills, collaborative learning is perceived as the most appropriate methodology. Collaborative learning is a technique to group students together to impact learning in a positive way in terms of learning outcomes, understanding of concepts and social development. It came from Vygotsy's idea of the '*zone of proximal development*', which considers what a student can do if aided/guided by peers or adults. Based on Deutsch (1962), Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2014) outline five elements that are needed for successful collaboration:

- a. Positive interdependence: the idea that the success of the group depends on the success of each individual
- b. Promotive interaction: students should be expected to actively help one another
- c. Individual and group accountability: the group is assessed both as a whole and individually, holding each individual accountable
- d. Development of teamwork skills: students are learning academic material as well as how to work in groups
- e. Group processing: students assess their group's productivity and discuss where changes are needed

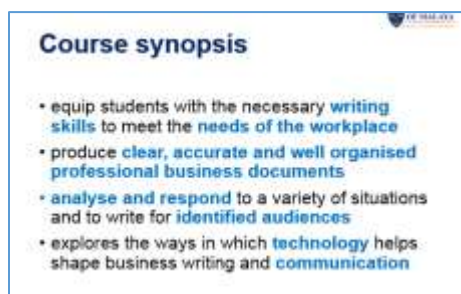
As such, group-based learning is perceived as the best learning approach for the course. It also caters for the logistic considerations given that the university needs to accommodate 200-600 students from more than 60 departments each semester. This will allow the individuals to participate both as individuals and as a group.

Further to prepare students for the real world, the course should have features of authenticity, experiential learning and pedagogical practicality that caters for students who come from multiple disciplines. A genre and audience-centred writing course (Mavor & Trayner, 2001) based on a social project is considered best to incorporate these needs. A social focus would make the course discipline-neutral as it caters for multiplicity in students' specializations as well as promote positive values and ethical behaviors aspired in the Malaysian Education Blueprint. Further, in line with the development of digital technologies, word processing are included in the course to assist students in their document preparations (e.g. mail-merging, auto-generation table of content, tracking changes, email and calendar functions, collaborative writing tools) which are skills transferable to future workplace. And as documents become more multimodal in line with digital and social media advancement, students will also be exposed to multi-literacy and the principles behind the production of multimodal texts such as visual information and creation of online pages (Svårdemo Åberg & Åkerfeldt, 2017).

## 4.0 Course design

Encapsulating the above theoretical underpinnings and principles, Table 1 summarizes the course content and design with reference to content and process needs in meeting the demands of the target situation.

Type of needs	Course Design
<b>Content Needs</b>	<b>Aspects of workplace writing (linguistic features and soft skills):</b> Genre-based Audience-based – business and professional tone & style Multimodal text (production – poster/social media and visual information presentation) ICT integration – word processing skills and use of digital media Communication Collaborative work Social responsibility Critical thinking and problem solving
<b>Process needs:</b>	<b>Methodological approach:</b> Group-based collaborative learning method based on a social project with outcome-based continuous assessments
<b>Demographic needs</b>	<b>Logistical consideration:</b> Large number of students (compulsory university course) Students from multiple disciplines (over 60 departments)



### Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs):

At the end of the course, students are able to:

1. demonstrate the ability to apply appropriate features of effective writing
2. develop documents common in business writing genres
3. write up on a research based project

### Course synopsis:

This course is designed to equip students with the necessary writing skills to meet the needs of the workplace. Students will also be taught to produce clear, accurate and well organized professional business documents. Students will be required to analyze and respond to a variety of situations and to write for identified audiences. The course also explores the ways in which technology helps shape business writing and communication

The genre-based group social project covers the technical aspects of following documents:

- Correspondence (Formal Letter/Email/Memo)
- Proposal



- Promotional/Informational material (multimodal)
- Feedback collection (Survey/Interview/Audio-visual)
- (Project implementation)
- Presentation of work progress (Feedback)
- Report writing (outcome/post-mortem)
- Personal reflection

Students were first taught the linguistic features, mechanics and stylistics of professional writing. Subsequently, the knowledge was applied in the writing of correspondence documents (email, memo and letter) before developing a project proposal. These two documents were then actually sent out to the relevant authorities for permission and approval to conduct the project. Upon approval, students proceeded with the promotion of the event both offline and online modes (producing poster, informational leaflet or online site to raise awareness of the issue being advocated). The learning instruction then continued with designing feedback collection tools such as (online) survey, constructing interview questions, using social media or using audio-visual recording. As part of the post-project implementation, the learning activity included analyzing feedback obtained to gauge the outcome of the project. The preliminary findings were presented to the instructor and peers for feedback before a final report was prepared. A personal reflection on the entire learning experience was then required from each student to encourage reflection on both positive and negative experiences which also serves as a means for instructors to assess course outcomes achievement.

## **5.0 Research methodology & data**

Following the above, to gauge the achievement of learning outcomes, this study applies qualitative action research methods. Action research is a systematic enquiry that interrogates and reflect on one's own practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and improve specific aspects of educational practices (Caro-Bruce, 2000; Sagor, 2005) often in a collaborative manner (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008). The data examined in this study are qualitative content analysis from students' work samples, students' personal feedback in the in-built reflective writing component and the university's standard course evaluation survey. The data analyzed here came from students who registered for this course in 3 different semesters, totaling N=875 individuals.

As this is action research, the evaluation of the course was done through existing evidence available which were students' own group reports, the university's compulsory standard end of course online survey (Course & Teaching Evaluation System – CTES), individual personal reflection and videos produced by students are as part of their project presentations.

### **5.1 Sample student projects**

Two projects are used as examples here; one conducted as a ground-based activity and the second, virtual-based.

#### *a) SketchWalk by a group of Architecture undergraduates*

The aim of the project was to invite sketching enthusiasts from within and outside campus to join a sketching lesson conducted by an architecture lecturer as well as to raise the awareness of preserving heritage buildings. This activity was conducted on campus at the university's graduation hall area. The said hall has been listed in the national heritage preservation list. The outcome of the project was evaluated based on responses received through post-activity survey questionnaire.



Figure 2.5 Looking for the right angle to start building perspective sketching.



Figure 2.7 Dr. Mustafa commented on participants' sketches for improvement and refinement.

#optimisticBDSUM by a group of dentistry undergraduates



This group of students from the Dental Faculty sought to spread positive values and motivation to their own peers in facing their academic challenges. They posted online nomination challenges on their faculty student group social media page (Facebook). Each student was to write on a piece of paper a positive value (e.g. diligence, honesty) and post a picture of themselves together with two specified hashtags and a motivational quote. The outcome of the project was measured by the number of posts, likes and shares tracked through the two hashtags as well as comments made.

## 5.2 Course & Teaching Evaluation System (CTES)

CTES is a compulsory standard course exit survey imposed by the university. Thus, the return rate of the survey is always 100%. There are 3 main sections in the survey which concern the course, the teaching and classroom facilities as well as an additional open-ended section for students to provide any comments and suggestions. Only 5 questions related to the course will be referred to

here. Students were required to rate the 5 statements on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The statements are



1. The course is interesting.
2. The course has achieved the intended learning outcomes.
3. The course is well-organized?
4. The course has stimulated your intellect and encouraged the generation/sharing of ideas.
5. The course relevant and can be applied for future use.

Only average scores were reported to instructors and over the 3 semesters, the results were as follows:

Semester	Number of students	Average score (Course evaluation)
Sem 2 2015/2016	125	4.29/5.00
Sem 2 2016/2017	175	4.45/5.00
Sem 2 2017/2018	575	4.33/5.00

Table 1: Average scores for course content evaluation

The above table suggests that generally students rated the course on the scales of 4 and 5 which is a very positive indication of the organization, conduct and relevance of the course. These views are further supported with comments in the open-ended section of the survey. Students have commended the documents taught, interpersonal skills and technical skills incorporated as well as the effort in preparing them for their anticipated workplace.

Some of the comments were:

Area	Unedited comments
Document writing	...I get to learn to <b>write professional documents</b> the correct way. I also get to <b>interact with others</b> as a team for our project...
Interpersonal skills	... There <b>is group work</b> and helps me to <b>enhance relationships</b> with classmates. <b>Content is useful for future...</b>
Use of technology	...all the contents and <b>use of technological skills help in effective communication</b>
Relevance of course	... the contents were <b>relevant to the working world, which all students in the university should get...</b>

Table 2: Students raw comments on CTES

### 5.3 Journal reflection

The journal reflection is part of the 300-500 word reflection on either the course or the project conducted.

Area	Unedited comments
Teaching & Learning Approaches	... the way of teaching English in this class is the most <b>lively and dynamic course</b> that I had ever attended before. I sincerely hope that other instructors would bring up such vibe to bring <b>fun</b> for other students as well who still found <b>English an unfamiliar elements</b> in their university lives...
Soft skills integration	... taught me a lot about group dynamics and project handling...challenges arose in terms of lack of leadership...we considered ourselves equal...but inevitably backfired causing slow decision-making and task execution...
Course content	... <b>useful when used working in society</b> . This <b>project provides a glimpse on how to use what we have learned</b> in this course to use, and I know that I had gained a lot of info and knowledge from it; namely, writing proposals, preparing letters and also what to analyse and learn from writing a report at the end of the activity. In the end, this <b>assignment definitely helped me to be prepared for conducting any projects, from the start till end of project</b>
IT skills	...modern and digital age appropriate

*Table 3: Quotations from students' individual reflection writing task*

In terms of learning approach, students found the classroom setting lively, fun and dynamic. In other words it was engaging. Having to work in a group to run a project had stretched students' interpersonal and thinking skills as well as nurtured leadership and cooperation within the team. Together with practical use of technology particularly advanced word processing skills, students perceived the course to be apt in preparing them for workplace challenges in terms of document preparations, working in a team, analyzing and solving problems.

#### **Findings: Practical Implications/Applicability of course**

The three data sets evaluated have indicated that the course is workable for the desired outcomes stated. In many ways it carries practical implications:

- Logistics: Within educational contexts with limited resources, it is effective not only for small classes but for instructing large classes too. The course content is discipline-neutral for students coming from various faculties and transferable to the context of any professional setting.
- Applicability of approach: It is an innovative approach and applicable to any educational contexts both locally and internationally. With the applicability of approaches, methodology and content, it can be adopted not only by ESL and EFL classes but to a 'native' speaker instructional setting.
- Holistic education: Apart from academic and linguistic skills, the course provides a holistic training. It includes the development of good attributes, interpersonal skills and social values (positive work ethics, communication skills, teamwork, decision-making and leadership skills). Group-based social project also enables natural development of these qualities when students take charge of their own learning and more importantly giving them voices for causes or social issues they advocate for.
- Practicality and transferability of skills to the workplace: The syllabus promotes authentic and practicable use of language. Although the batches of students studied here have yet to

graduate, these preliminary findings indicate the course is able to help these future early career professionals pre-empt possible scenarios anticipated at their future workplaces.

#### Recommendation for future studies

- CEFR alignment: The course should be further benchmarked or aligned with descriptors of C1/Low C2 in the Common European Framework of Languages.
- Validity/Reliability of testing/assessment: The assessment instruments should be further evaluated for validity and reliability so that the scores could be used as formal indications of a student's ability to perform as aspired in the course learning outcomes.
- Multi-literacies: As digital technology advances, texts presentations are not limited to verbal texts only. While students have been exposed to multimodal texts in their daily lives, the course should also engage students further in the production of multimodal documents. This can be done through inclusion of the principles in graphic design and social interpretation of the various modes to help enhance multi-literacies among the undergraduates.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION & CAVEAT

This action research has given us insights into how the course could cater for the multi-dimensional demands of developing skills in professional writing, communication strategies, digital technology and simultaneously nurture employable characters. It provides a balance in securing both learned and value-driven graduates desired in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) with the right mindsets the industry needs. While it is recognized that quintessential ESP is that the recommendations made is for use once by one group of students (Robinson, 1980), this study which was conducted over three semesters suggests the curriculum is practical in many contexts and cultural settings as the project work is situated within students' local social circumstances. By matching the classroom culture with work culture, the shared curriculum here is indeed 'ecologically' viable.

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- University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur

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