

OUTCOMES –  
LANGUAGE,  
EMPLOYMENT  
AND FURTHER  
STUDY

« A DISCUSSION PAPER »

For a National Symposium:  
English Language Competence of  
International Students | August  
2007

### **About This Paper**

This paper was commissioned by Australian Education International (AEI) in the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) as background for and to aid discussion at a National Symposium: *English Language Competence of International Students*, held on 14 August 2007 in Sydney. The preparation of this report was managed by the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA).

### **About AEI and DEST**

DEST is a department within the Australian Government, tasked with providing national education and training leadership. DEST works with states and territory government agencies, industry and the community in support of the Australian Government's objectives.

AEI is the international division of DEST. AEI works to integrate the development of international government relations with support for the international activities of Australia's education and training community.

For further information go to: <http://aei.dest.gov.au/Aei/Default.aspx>

### **About IEAA**

The International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) is a lead professional organization representing members from the higher education, vocational education and training, English language and schools sectors working in international education. Membership is drawn from within Australia and internationally.

For further information go to: [www.ieaa.org.au](http://www.ieaa.org.au).

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## FOREWORD

This Discussion Paper is one of three commissioned by Australian Education International in the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training for a one-day National Symposium, *English Language Competence of International Students*, held on Tuesday 14 August 2007 at the Sheraton on the Park Hotel, Sydney.

The Symposium will address the issues shaping the English language competence of international students and graduates in light of emerging research and in response to recent media coverage in Australia and overseas about the matter. The Symposium will address perceptions about the quality and effectiveness of the Australian international student program in relation to English language competence of international students. Outcomes from the Symposium will inform future policy and practice.

The Discussion papers prepared for the Symposium are:

Discussion Paper 1: *Pathways – Preparation and Selection*

Discussion Paper 2: *In-Course Language Development and Support*

Discussion Paper 3: *Outcomes – Language, Employment and Further Study*

The aim of the Discussion Papers is to:

Examine current knowledge and gaps in knowledge on the topic, drawing on Australian and where possible international research.

Discuss implications for Australian policy and practice in this area.

Identify critical issues for consideration by the Symposium.

The broad aim of the Symposium is to consider what we know about the efficacy of Australian policy and practice in this area and to consider directions for enhancement of our knowledge and practice.

Outcomes of the Symposium will be presented in a final Symposium Report for wide dissemination, including at the Australian International Education Conference to be held in Melbourne from 9-12 October 2007.

IEAA is delighted to be working with AEI to foster discussion and debate and to further industry and community understanding within Australia about the issue of English language competence of international students and thereby contributing to enhancing Australia's reputation as a high quality international education provider.

Dennis Murray  
Executive Director  
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# CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Executive Summary</b> .....   | 5  |
| 1. <b>Skill Migration and Australia’s Export Education Industry</b> .....                    | 7  |
| 2. <b>Do English Skills Matter to Australian Employers?</b> .....                            | 9  |
| 3. <b>The Significance of English to Students’ Employment Outcomes: Recent Data</b> .....    | 9  |
| 4. <b>English Language Requirements, Select Professions and International Students</b> ..... | 11 |
| 5. <b>Current English Language Issues</b> .....  | 18 |
| 6. <b>Conclusion</b> .....   | 24 |

References

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper defines the growing interconnection between Australia's international education industry and skill migration programs, including the impact of former international students' English on skill migration and employment outcomes.

Since 1999, international students have been immediately eligible to migrate to Australia on the assumption that they are characterised by youth, advanced English language ability, recognised qualifications, locally relevant training, and a high degree of acculturation. By 2005 former international students constituted more than half of skill migrants, with 'migration-driven' countries (most notably China and India) the new major sources of supply. In a process dubbed 'two step migration' 66% of Indian and 38% of Chinese students currently convert status and stay, compensating for declining international student flows from 'traditional' South East Asian source countries such as Malaysia and Singapore.

In 2006 the Australian Government commissioned the most substantial review of Australia's skill migration program since 1988. A major finding was that onshore Principal Applicants (PAs) achieve significantly worse than offshore PAs in terms annual salaries, average weekly earnings, job satisfaction and use of formal qualifications.

Within this complex policy environment, the current paper examines the significance of English language ability for Australian employment outcomes, including employer and regulatory body requirements in the dominant international student fields of accounting, information technology, engineering, medicine and nursing. A number of problematic issues are identified, most notably (in relation to English language and former students) the risk of:

- the mandatory English language levels for skill migration being substantially lower than employers require;
- institutional conflict of interest, leading to potentially compromised international student academic entry and progression standards;
- unrealistic assumptions concerning the speed and certainty of students' post-arrival IELTS gains (given the capacity of short English language courses to deliver guaranteed access to degree and diploma courses via packaged visas);
- inadequate surveillance or quality control of rapidly emerging registered training organisation providers, providing training for the vocational education and training sector; and
- the extraordinary level of cultural and linguistic enclosure experienced by many international students who are at risk of academic segregation.

Responding to such concerns raised by the 2006 skill migration review, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) has taken major recent steps to lift English language standards. From September 2007 exemptions from language testing will no longer automatically be allowed for international students applying for permanent residency and IELTS 6 will become the threshold 'competence' score across all 4 skills.

Liberalised access to post-course visas will facilitate former students' post-course stay, allowing them an additional 18 months to 'gain skilled work experience, improve their English language skills, or undertake a 'Professional Year' related to their field of study. Higher migration points will also be provided to graduates who have completed more challenging study: most notably those possessing doctorate degrees (25 points) or 3 year qualifications (15 points).

Despite these measures, the paper concludes by defining four issues recommended for future sustained surveillance and research:

1. Analysis of international students' future employment and study trajectories (within and beyond Australia);
2. Assessment of the impact of inadequate English levels on subsequent study (for international students progressing to second Australian degrees);
3. Definition of the English level required for effective performance in vocational fields and trades (given their growing prominence in skill migration); and
4. Development of more effective mechanisms to audit students' English language entry and academic progression standards (including in courses offered by emerging private sector providers).

## 1. SKILL MIGRATION AND AUSTRALIA'S EXPORT EDUCATION INDUSTRY

Australia is a global exemplar of nation-building through government planned and administered skill, family and humanitarian migration programs. By 2005 it included the world's highest percentage of foreign-born (24.6% of the population, with over 240 nationalities), followed by Canada at 19.2% and the US at 11.7% (Miller 2005).

As early as 2001 26.1% of all recent migrants/refugees to Australia held a qualification, with 1996-2001 arrivals twice as likely to be tertiary-qualified as those born in Australia (13.7%). The impact of migration on select professions had become striking, with 49% of Australia's information technology workforce overseas-born, along with 48% of engineers, 46% of doctors, 36% of accountants, 34% of architects, and substantial numbers qualified in other professions. (See Table 1.)

High numbers of these degree-qualified migrants had reached Australia in the previous 5 years, including 14% of the total Australian IT workforce, 12% of engineers, 10% of doctors and 11% of management/commerce workers (Hawthorne 2007). In the period since 2001 Australia's commitment to skill migration has continued to intensify, rather than decline. In 2004-05, 77,800 people were selected in the economic category, constituting 58% of Australia's total 130,000 migrant intake at this time. Unprecedented targets of 97,500 have been set for both 2005-06 and 2006-07 – triple the scale of a decade earlier (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007a).

*Table 1: The impact of migration on the Australian professional workforce (2001)*

| Degree/Higher Degree Arrivals by Field | Australia -born | Overseas-born      |                    |            |            | Number          |
|--|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------|------------|-----------------|
|  |                 | All overseas -born | By Year of Arrival |            |            |                 |
|  |                 |                    | Pre-1991           | 1991-1996  | 1996-2001  |                 |
| Information Technology                 | 51.2            | 48.8               | 27.4               | 7.2        | 14.2       | 69,694          |
| Engineering                            | 52.2            | 47.8               | 27.7               | 8.5        | 11.6       | 136,454         |
| Architecture & Building                | 66.3            | 33.7               | 22.3               | 4.4        | 7.0        | 32,554          |
| Medical Studies                        | 54.2            | 45.8               | 30.1               | 5.8        | 9.9        | 47,251          |
| Nursing                                | 75.9            | 24.1               | 19.2               | 2.2        | 2.7        | 137,949         |
| Teacher Education                      | 80.2            | 19.8               | 15.2               | 1.8        | 2.8        | 285,971         |
| Accounting                             | 64.2            | 35.7               | 23.4               | 4.6        | 7.7        | 100,923         |
| Rest of Management/ Commerce           | 64.4            | 35.6               | 20.1               | 5.0        | 10.5       | 218,339         |
| Society & Culture, Creative Arts       | 68.8            | 31.1               | 20.5               | 3.6        | 7.0        | 405,391         |
| Natural & Physical Sciences            | 62.6            | 37.4               | 23.8               | 5.4        | 8.2        | 145,453         |
| Other                                  | 71.2            | 28.8               | 19.4               | 3.6        | 5.8        | 189,175         |
| <b>Total</b>                           | <b>67.7</b>     | <b>32.3</b>        | <b>21.0</b>        | <b>4.2</b> | <b>7.1</b> | <b>1,769,15</b> |

*Source: Labour Market Outcomes for Migrant Professionals – Canada and Australia Compared, L Hawthorne, Citizenship and Canada, Ottawa (2007)*

Reflecting labour market demand, temporary intakes have been deregulated and are also increasing rapidly (including very substantial numbers of international students). By 2004-05, 426,317 permanent and long-term arrivals were allocated visas for Australia, rising to 457,414 in 2005-06 (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 2006; 2007). As demonstrated by Table 2, in 2006 there were 383,818 international student enrolments in Australian courses (all sectors), with 138,582 granted entry in the July-December 2006 period alone.

Reflecting skill migration policy changes since 1999, high proportions of these students will choose to remain - converting status in a process termed 'two-step migration'. By 2005 former international students constituted 52% of Australia's permanent skill migration program, with 66% of Indian and 38% of Chinese (PRC) students electing to stay (Birrell & Rapson 2005). Migration-driven student flows have offset the decline of 'traditional' international student source countries to Australia (eg Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong; see Tables 2 and 3.)

The latest available data confirm 29,670 skill migration approvals for July-December 2006, with primary source regions now the UK/Ireland (9,804), South Asia (6,247), North East Asia (4,382), South East Asia (3,623), and Sub-Saharan Africa (2,163) (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007a). Recent international students dominate these Asian flows (14,252), in a context where Australia's export education industry and skill migration have become linked. Within this context, as we shall see, students' attributes (including English ability) have a marked impact on skill migration program outcomes.

*Table 2: International student enrolments in Australia by top 10 source countries (2005-06)*

| Nationality         | 2005 Enrolments | 2005 Growth | 2006 Enrolments | 2006 Growth |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|
| China               | 81,730          | 15.8%       | 90,287          | 10.5%       |
| India               | 27,605          | 33.0%       | 39,166          | 41.9%       |
| South Korea         | 26,319          | 10.5%       | 31,257          | 18.8%       |
| Hong Kong           | 21,343          | -7.1%       | 20,523          | -3.8%       |
| Malaysia            | 19,362          | -3.2%       | 19,166          | -1.0%       |
| Thailand            | 16,514          | 1.2%        | 17,889          | 8.3%        |
| Japan               | 19,053          | -4.9%       | 17,804          | -6.6%       |
| Indonesia           | 16,121          | -11.1%      | 15,038          | -6.7%       |
| United States       | 12,585          | -1.6%       | 12,045          | -4.3%       |
| Brazil              | 7,081           | 49.7%       | 10,190          | 43.9%       |
| Other nationalities | 98,366          | 3.3%        | 110,453         | 12.3%       |
| Total               | 346,079         | 6.4%        | 383,818         | 10.9%       |

Source: 'International Student Numbers Continue to Grow', Department of Education, Science and Training, March 2007, Canberra

*Table 3: Top 10 countries of citizenship for skill migration applicants 2003/04 to 2005/06*

| 2003-04     | No.  | %   | 2004-05 (July-June) | No.  | %   | 2005-06 (July-Nov) | No.  | %   |
|-------------|------|-----|---------------------|------|-----|--------------------|------|-----|
| India       | 7103 | 19% | UK                  | 5959 | 18% | India              | 2363 | 19% |
| China       | 5506 | 15% | India               | 5145 | 15% | China              | 2258 | 18% |
| UK          | 4698 | 13% | China               | 4338 | 13% | UK                 | 2071 | 16% |
| Malaysia    | 2029 | 6%  | Malaysia            | 1947 | 6%  | Malaysia           | 536  | 4%  |
| Indonesia   | 1990 | 5%  | Indonesia           | 1525 | 5%  | Philippines        | 431  | 3%  |
| Singapore   | 1490 | 4%  | Hong Kong           | 1439 | 4%  | Indonesia          | 430  | 3%  |
| Hong Kong   | 1199 | 3%  | Singapore           | 1242 | 4%  | Hong Kong          | 404  | 3%  |
| Korea       | 1033 | 3%  | Sri Lanka           | 1028 | 3%  | Korea              | 391  | 3%  |
| Sri Lanka   | 925  | 3%  | Philippines         | 986  | 3%  | Sri Lanka          | 331  | 3%  |
| Philippines | 919  | 3%  | Korea               | 856  | 3%  | Singapore          | 291  | 2%  |

Source: *Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration Categories*, B Birrell, L Hawthorne & S Richardson, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006



## **2. DO ENGLISH SKILLS MATTER TO AUSTRALIAN EMPLOYERS?**

To what extent does English language ability matter to employers, in the context of a rapidly diversifying labour force, where 40% of degree or diploma-qualified workers are now born overseas? The answer is it can hardly be over-estimated, representing 'the form of human capital that appears to matter most' (Hiebert 2006).

Successive Australian reports since the 1970s have confirmed the inferior employment rates and work status achieved by non-English speaking background (NESB) migrants in Australia, despite their possession of generally higher qualifications, with recessions rendering them particularly vulnerable in terms of employment (Stricker & Sheehan 1981; Ackland, Williams & Marshall 1994). By 1981 it had been demonstrated that poor English language competence 'doubled the probability of (males) being unemployed', with key unemployment predictors being English language ability, birthplace, period of residence in Australia, and the country in which formal qualifications had been gained (Bureau of Labour Market Research 1986: 86).

While NESB migrants' labour market disadvantage was not unduly serious if transitory, it could take an exceedingly long time to dissipate. Further, 'employment' per se could be a poor indicator of success - masking an underutilisation of NESB migrants' full professional capacity (Office of Multicultural Affairs 1989). Separate Australian studies have shown poor English ability to triple the unemployment risk for males, while doubling it for females; to diminish employment access by up to 50 per cent; and to substantially reduce the likelihood of skill migrants even commencing the credential recognition process (Brooks & Volker 1985; Inglis & Stromback 1986; Iredale 1987).

By 1989 poor English language ability was considered to represent 'an awesome and devastating barrier' at every stage of the employment life cycle in Australia (Office of Multicultural Affairs 1989: 39). Moreover the evidence demonstrated as education level increased 'the labour market position of immigrants vis a vis the Australian-born systematically deteriorate(d)' (Wooden 1994: 230).

Comparable trends were evident in Canada, showing the higher a migrant's official language capability, the greater the employment and earning opportunities enjoyed (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 1998; Chiswick & Miller 2000a, 2000b; Chiswick et al 2002; Ferrer, Green & Riddell 2004). Within this context the recent dominance of China, India, Pakistan and the Philippines in skill migration flows has coincided with severely reduced outcomes, despite the strength of the economic boom (Hawthorne 2007).

Increasingly the argument has been made that professionals cannot take their place in a knowledge economy if lacking sophisticated spoken and written English skills. Within interactive professions such as medicine, nursing, teaching and engineering, high level English ability is viewed as mandatory. In New Zealand IELTS 6.5 is now required for skill migrants (increased from the previous level of Band 5), in a context where 88% of skill applicants first arrived as international students or short term workers (Bedford 2006).

## **3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGLISH TO STUDENTS' EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES: RECENT DATA**

### ***Longitudinal Survey Data***

The most compelling data on Australian language and employment outcomes have derived from the groundbreaking *Longitudinal Survey on Immigrants to Australia* (LSIA) (since replicated across Canada and New Zealand). English ability was confirmed to be pivotal by the mid-1990s, given:

*... In tightly competitive labour markets employers are under little pressure to even consider the merits of (those) without good English language skills... While employment outcomes for those rating themselves as speaking English 'not well' or as having no English improve over time, they continue to be considerably poorer than those experienced by migrants with good English language skills (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1999: 50-51).*

Since 1999, based on the research evidence, Australian skill migration applicants have been required to achieve 'vocational' or higher scores on the International English Language Testing System (or approved equivalent), along with other pre-migration measures<sup>1</sup>. The allocation of points for applicants with below 'vocational' English levels has been abolished (Hawthorne 2005). The value of this and other selection measures<sup>2</sup> has subsequently been powerfully corroborated by Australia's 2000 and 2005 longitudinal survey data (Cobb-Clark 2004; Chiswick & Miller 2004; Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson 2006; Hawthorne 2007).

Within 2 years of Australia mandating English language testing for offshore applicants, 81% of skill immigrants secured work within 6 months of arrival (compared to 60% in the mid 1990s), a figure rising to 83% by 2006. The proportion of migrants using English well or very well surged, from 45% in the mid 1990s to 73% after the 1999+ policy change. The employment gulf between migrants with high versus low level English became vast: 73% of the former securing work within 6 months of arrival by 1999/2000, compared to just 41% of the latter. As demonstrated by Table 4 (based on LSIA 1 and 2 data), this policy change also greatly assisted relatively disadvantaged professionals from Eastern Europe, China, the Philippines and India.

The most extensive review of Australia's skill migration program in 20 years has since provided further evidence of the critical significance of English language ability to work outcomes. By 2006, 89% of Principal Applicants with English as 'only or best' language were employed within 6 months of arrival, compared to 86% knowing English 'very well', 76% 'well' and 59% 'not well'. PAs with the strongest command of English were those most likely to be using their qualifications in work (61%, compared to 60%, 44% and 37%), and to be employed at high levels (in professional or managerial positions). Unprecedented numbers of skill migrants in Australia now use their credentials at once in employment, access professional or managerial status, and earn high salaries. Greatly improved outcomes are simultaneously being achieved by PAs from visible minorities, older skill migrants and females – with English language facility proven to be a major contributory factor.

Overall, by the time of the 2006 skill migration review,

*.... graduates... who did not speak English at least 'very well' were much more likely to be not employed; about half as likely as those with better English to be employed in a job commensurate with their skills; and about twice as likely to be employed in a relatively low skilled job... Among those with Masters degrees, the differences between those who spoke English best and those who spoke it 'very well' were not large. In contrast, these differences in level of command over English were associated with substantially worse outcomes for those with Bachelor level qualifications for the less proficient (but still good) English speakers... We conclude that in most dimensions of labour market success, the key is to have a level of English competence that enables the respondent to report that they speak English at least 'very well' (Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson 2006: 87).*

The research findings in Canada and New Zealand were highly comparable. In Canada, for instance, where pre-migration English/French language screening is still not mandatory, the latest available data show:

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<sup>1</sup> These include mandatory qualifications screening for Principal Applicants, and the award of substantial bonus points for applicants with occupations in demand.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of all skill migration 1999+ policy changes see Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (1999) and Hawthorne (2005).

... (B)y the early 2000s, skilled class entering immigrants were actually more likely to enter low-income and be in chronic low-income than their family class counterparts, and the small advantage that the university educated entering immigrants had over, say, the high school educated in the early 1990s had largely disappeared by 2000, as the number of highly educated rose. What did change was the face of the chronically poor immigrant; by the late 1990s one-half were in the skilled economic class, and 41% had degrees (up from 13% in the early 1990s) (Picot, Hou & Coulombe 2007: 5-6).

Table 4: The impact of improved economic migration screening (1999+) on employment outcomes in 6 months for select birthplace groups, Australia (1993-95 and 1999-2000)

| Birthplace of Select Skill Migration Principal Applicants | Employment Within 6 Months (1993-95 Arrivals) | Employment Within 6 Months (1999-2000 Arrivals) |
|---|---|---|
| UK/Ireland  | 85%   | 86%   |
| South Africa  | 76%   | 89%   |
| North West Europe   | 73%   | 83%   |
| Eastern Europe  | 31%   | 79%   |
| Philippines   | 57%   | 76%   |
| India   | 56%   | 73%   |
| Hong Kong/Malaysia/Singapore                              | 53%   | 68%   |
| China   | 45%   | 61%   |
| Middle East/ North Africa                                 | 42%   | 72%   |
| North, South East & Central Asia                          | 40%   | 77%   |

Source: Analysis by L Hawthorne of the Longitudinal Survey on Immigrants to Australia (1993-95 compared to 2000-01 data)

#### 4. ENGLISH LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS, SELECT PROFESSIONS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

As established in the above analysis, by 2005 international students had become Australia's primary source of skill migrants (52%), dominating select professional fields. The skill migration review however identified major concerns about the calibre of students' English (compounding additional concerns for the quality of their professional and technical training).

From 1999 to September 2007, students seeking two-step migration onshore were exempted from English language testing when applying for permanent residency – the assumption being that their English and acculturation levels would be strong by the point of migration (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1999). The skilled migration review provided compelling evidence that this was not in fact always the case. A range of Australian providers appeared to have compromised their declared academic entry standards in the process of developing international student flows (Slaughter & Leslie 1999). Despite the majority of Australian universities 'requiring' IELTS entry levels of Band 6.0 or above for tertiary courses, testing by DIMA provided unambiguous evidence that many former students fell well short of this standard – captured at their point of transition to skill migration following a minimum of 2 years Australian residence and tertiary study.

By 2004-05, 43% of recent international student graduates from China gained scores of IELTS Band 5, along with 36% of those from Vietnam, and 29% from Thailand (Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson 2006). A year later the proportion of graduates scoring IELTS 5 rather than 6 or higher was significantly worse, including an extraordinary 56% of former students from South Korea, 51% from Thailand, 47% from Taiwan, 43% from both China and Hong Kong, and 42% from Bangladesh. (See Table 5.)

In accounting for such outcomes, the skill migration review identified serious risks in relation to Australia's export education industry, most notably (in terms of English):

- *Institutional conflict of interest*, leading to potentially compromised academic entry and progression standards;
- *Unrealistic assumptions* concerning the speed and certainty of students' post-arrival IELTS gains (given the capacity of short ESL courses to deliver guaranteed access to degree and diploma courses via packaged visas);
- *Inadequate surveillance or quality control* of rapidly emerging registered training organisation providers, providing training for the vocational sector; and
- *The high level of cultural and linguistic enclosure* experienced by many international students, particularly those located in select regional universities' Sydney or Melbourne 'campuses', who were at serious risk of academic segregation.

Table 5: Language Scores of Former International Students Approved 2004-05 and 2005-06 (Sub-Class 880) by Major Country of Origin

| Source Country | ESL Points: 15 (IELTS 5) 2004-05 | ESL Points: 15 (IELTS 5) 2005-06 | ESL Points: 20 (IELTS 6) 2004-05 | ESL Points: 20 (IELTS 6) 2005-06 | Total Tested 2004-05 | Total Tested 2005-06 |
|----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| China          | 43%                              | 43%                              | 56%                              | 57%                              | 2,655                | 4,209                |
| India          | 5%                               | 17%                              | 94%                              | 82%                              | 2,433                | 2,169                |
| Indonesia      | 16%                              | 32%                              | 84%                              | 68%                              | 1,408                | 749                  |
| Malaysia       | 16%                              | 24%                              | 84%                              | 76%                              | 1,113                | 797                  |
| Hong Kong      | 17%                              | 43%                              | 83%                              | 57%                              | 863                  | 683                  |
| South Korea    | 23%                              | 56%                              | 76%                              | 44%                              | 474                  | 449                  |
| Singapore      | 10%                              | 18%                              | 90%                              | 82%                              | 440                  | 258                  |
| Bangladesh     | 23%                              | 42%                              | 77%                              | 58%                              | 436                  | 479                  |
| Sri Lanka      | 10%                              | 25%                              | 90%                              | 75%                              | 360                  | 346                  |
| Japan          | 18%                              | 37%                              | 82%                              | 63%                              | 248                  | 174                  |
| Taiwan         | 24%                              | 47%                              | 76%                              | 53%                              | 231                  | 133                  |
| Pakistan       | 9%                               | 25%                              | 90%                              | 75%                              | 224                  | 141                  |
| Thailand       | 29%                              | 51%                              | 70%                              | 49%                              | 200                  | 175                  |
| Vietnam        | 36%                              | 33%                              | 64%                              | 67%                              | 200                  | 152                  |

Source: Adapted from data provided in *Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration Categories*, B Birrell, L Hawthorne & S Richardson, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006 and 'Implications of Low English Standards Among Overseas Students at Australian Universities', B Birrell, *People & Place*, Vol 14 No 4 2006.

These results were the reverse of those anticipated by government. Since 1999, as noted, international students have been immediately eligible to migrate to Australia on the assumption that they are characterised by youth, advanced English language ability, recognised qualifications, locally relevant training, and a high degree of acculturation (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1999). A major finding of the 2006 review however was that recent onshore applicants achieved significantly worse than offshore Principal Applicants in terms of professional work. Despite near identical proportions being employed within 6 months of arrival (82-83%), former students were found to be characterised by:

*Annual salaries of around \$33,000 (compared to \$52,500 of offshore arrivals);  
Average weekly earnings of \$641 (compared to \$1,015);  
Lower job satisfaction, with 44% liking their work (compared to 57%); and  
Far less 'often' use of formal qualifications in current work (46% compared to 63%)  
(Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson 2006: 97).*

In terms of these outcomes, how problematic is students' English? And what level do Australian employers in fact require for the performance of professional work?

### **Case Study 1: Accounting**

Accountancy is the field currently dominating skill migration. (See Table 6.) By 2005-06 it provided 25% of all skill applicants, compared to 19% in 2004-05 and 13% in 2003-04. 9,702 visas were issued to PAs that year, most notably to the 6,595 former international students whom the review panel found were virtually guaranteed selection unless they failed health or character checks ('99% certainty').

According to a recent study professional accounting bodies have been unwilling to engage in public debate concerning English language standards, with CPA Australia viewed as 'reluctant to police, as a professional body, the level of English skills required to enter the profession' (Watty 2007: 28). At the same time concerns have emerged about the calibre of recent graduates, including their quality of English.

Regulatory officials interviewed for the 2006 skill migration review<sup>3</sup> affirmed employer wariness concerning the perceived 'readiness' of new graduates, including former students characterised by a high degree of linguistic and/or cultural enclosure. Assessing multiple membership applications, CPA had become keenly aware of employer demand for higher order English skills, bolstered by 'the soft skills of understanding and effective communication'. In many instances (surprisingly) this was seen as best supplied by offshore rather than onshore applicants, in a context where former international students had been exempted from English language testing in contrast to applicants applying from overseas. Moreover students' commitment to accountancy could be in doubt – one informant stating 'There is a huge skill shortage in accounting across the world, but international students are not seeking it as an accredited profession in many cases, rather a tool to access migration.'

*Table 6: Visas issued by major occupation group and subclass of visa, 2005-06, General Skilled Migration Program (GSM) – Principal Applicant only*

| <b>Occupation Group</b>                      | <b>Visa 880, 881, 882 (Onshore)</b> | <b>Visa 136 (Offshore)</b> | <b>All Other GSM Visas</b> | <b>Total GSM Visas Issued</b> |
|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Accountants, auditors, corporate treasurers  | 6595                                | 2619                       | 488                        | 9702                          |
| Computing professionals                      | 3589                                | 2755                       | 729                        | 7073                          |
| Building/ engineering professionals          | 1484                                | 1745                       | 811                        | 4040                          |
| Food tradespersons                           | 952                                 | 394                        | 154                        | 1500                          |
| Nursing                                      | 229                                 | 1136                       | 107                        | 1472                          |
| Misc business/ information professionals     | 432                                 | 96                         | 897                        | 1425                          |
| Mechanical engineering tradespersons         | 4                                   | 1057                       | 325                        | 1386                          |
| Sales, marketing & advertising professionals | 186                                 | 94                         | 779                        | 1059                          |
| Structural construction tradespersons        | 3                                   | 543                        | 306                        | 852                           |
| Other occupations                            | 1884                                | 3367                       | 4413                       | 9664                          |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>15383</b>                        | <b>14593</b>               | <b>9400</b>                | <b>39376</b>                  |

Source: 'Implications of Low English Standards Among Overseas Students at Australian Universities', B Birrell, *People & Place*, Vol 14 No 4 2006.

<sup>3</sup> L Hawthorne researched and wrote the Operational and International Chapters of the 2006 skill migration review, conducting 70 interviews regarding English, accreditation and employment issues.

Two recent surveys have challenged the quality of Australian accountancy training, including the English language standards of international students, and the maintenance of appropriate quality control. According to an associate professor at RMIT:

*(I)t appears that many students are completing their university degrees with an English language competency well below that expected for effective participation in the professional workforce. Possibly many who might benefit from... additional assistance are managing to 'get the degree' without it. This is an issue of concern for accounting educators and those professional accounting bodies that accredit their programs... Academics lament the lack of control that they currently have over the entry requirements in many of the courses they teach. The English competency of many students, particularly international students, is an issue of concern for all stakeholders (Watty 2007: 26-28).*

### **Case Study 2: Information Technology**

Computing professionals have been the second main source of skill migrants in recent times – half of these former international students applying through two-step migration (3,589). Indeed IT accounted for a third of skill migration visas issued in 2003-04 and 22% in 2004-05 (Kinnaird 2005; Australian Computer Society 2005). As is the case with accounting, substantial numbers of these IT professionals have first completed two year Australian Masters courses, often without possession of underlying cognate degrees. (See Table 7 for data confirming the degree of international student demand for Masters degree by coursework options.)

*Table 7: International student trends by level of enrolment, all Australian tertiary courses, First semester commencements (2001-04)*

| <b>Course Level</b>        | <b>2001</b>   | <b>2004</b>   | <b>N= Increase<br/>2001-2004</b> |
|----------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------------------------|
| Higher degree by research  | 1,228         | 1,417         | 189                              |
| Masters by coursework      | 9,359         | 16,958        | 7,599                            |
| Other postgraduate         | 3,453         | 3,697         | 244                              |
| <b>TOTAL POSTGRADUATE</b>  | <b>14,040</b> | <b>22,072</b> | <b>8,032</b>                     |
| Bachelor                   | 18,866        | 23,517        | 4,651                            |
| Other undergraduate        | 3,779         | 6,384         | 2,605                            |
| <b>TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE</b> | <b>22,685</b> | <b>51,973</b> | <b>15,288</b>                    |

Source: *Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration Categories*, B Birrell, L Hawthorne & S Richardson, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006.

Universities, colleges and private providers have vigorously competed to recruit such students, including by establishing campuses located in the central business districts of the major Australian capital cities, having a focus on a narrow range of professional disciplines and catering to a mainly international student clientele.

As confirmed by the skill migration review, many such students from China have arrived on visas characterised by less stringent IELTS requirements - eg 'packaged visas' combining short ELICOS training with guaranteed tertiary course access. Problems associated with low English entry standards, according to informants, are then at risk of being compounded by providers compromising the English language standards with which they assess and teach. By 2005 new IT graduates in Australia were characterised by higher unemployment rates than the norm, below average labour market participation rates, and a far greater risk of de-skilled work – an outcome applying to many recent students converting to skill migration.

According to a recent analysis, the Australian Computer Society has failed 'to (come to) grips with this situation', with students continuing to enrol 'despite the impact their English language shortcomings may be having in relation to the learning process' (Birrell 2006: 63). Within this context, a 'mountain of anecdotal material' reportedly exists to support the view that international students are 'struggl(ing) to meet course requirements', in a context where:

*Universities cope by lowering the English demands in the courses they teach... accomplished in subjects like accounting and IT by focussing requirements on problems which do not require essay writing skills, or by setting group assignments in which the students with better English help out (Birrell 2006: 62).*

While the information technology field remains unregulated in Australia, a number of critics are increasingly vocal in their concern at the scale and calibre of international student intakes, including the level of English language competence required. In its submission to the skill migration review the Australian Computer Society called for the award of 'negative points' for 'Migration Occupations in Oversupply', together with the repatriation of IT applicants should they 'be unable to corroborate' their possession of the level of Australian skills required (Australian Computer Society 2005: 2).

While professional protectionism was undoubtedly an issue here, it has been reasonable asserted that 'The English language skills actually required for ICT professional work may well be closer to the Band 7.0 IELTS of the medical/health professions than to the current (Australian Computer Society) 'default' minimum of Band 5' (Kinnaird 2005: 73). Moreover IT professionals, without question, require advanced English skills to describe processes, instruct and interface with users, including interacting with communicative precision.

### ***Case Study 3: Engineering***

The barriers confronting engineers of non English speaking backgrounds (NESB) exemplify the challenge of poor English in the knowledge economy. Extensive interviews with employers affirm their conviction that high-level English and communication skills are now 'absolutely mandatory' to Australian employment, to the degree that 'You do not get your foot in the door if you do not clearly speak English'. Recruitment agencies report being 'once bitten twice shy' in relation to NESB employees, having hired people in the past whose language skills have proven a liability (eg up to 100 grammatical errors in a one page written report). Given such concerns, a range of strategies are adopted to test 'real' English competence, with recruiters aware that strong written applications can be ghosted. A key engineering recruitment agency times interviews, as indicative of the speed and efficiency with which NESB engineers can give information. Employers request questionnaires to be filled in on-site, with 'free fields' deliberately placed to test applicants' written communication. A third technique to screen out the worst communicators is the placing of unexpected phone calls – described as a 'quick and effective edit', 'a real acid test', that could sabotage migrants' reliance on pre-prepared 'rigid scripts'. At interview an NESB engineer can be asked to explain 10 diagrams, a strategy designed to overcome 'the fudge factor', which linguistically causes '50% of them to die a million deaths'. The results can be devastating:

*They're struggling over English and having to sort of pluck the right words from the air, and the stumble, and it takes them longer to say what they want (Hawthorne 1994: 66).*

Such techniques are not seen as unfairly discriminatory in the context of a 'lean and mean' engineering workforce, where 'backroom jobs have vanished'. Rather, advanced English is viewed as core to safe and effective professional practice, including for former international students. By 2004/05 11% of Australia's 14,441 on-shore skill migration visa applications were from newly qualified engineers. Engineers Australia (the professional body) had mandated IELTS Band 6 for 'professional engineer' registration - a more realistic measure of competence, in its view, than the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs' more modest IELTS 5 threshold. IELTS 6 has since also been required for sub-professional engineer registration.

Despite minuscule unemployment rates and the current minerals boom, a Western Australian submission to the 2006 DIMA review still affirmed that engineers born in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and South Asia were the least successful in finding work. Communication barriers were seen as a major contributory factor in this, including graduates' capacity for organisational 'verbal interaction' and knowledge of engineering jargon (Trevelyan 2006).

#### **Case Study 4: Medicine**

Medicine is an additional field attracting large numbers of international students. By 2004, 1,505 international students were enrolled in Australian pre-registration courses - recent research establishing that 66% will transit immediately to permanent or temporary skill migration (Hawthorne, Hawthorne & Crotty 2007; Hamilton & Hawthorne forthcoming; see Table 8). Given medicine's status as a culturally and linguistically based profession, sophisticated language skills have long been required. As early as 1990, the Chairman of the Australian Medical Council's Examination Committee stated:

*...all English speaking developed countries take the view that foreign medical graduates who choose to emigrate must demonstrate in objective testing a good level of proficiency in English as well as the level of professional competence expected of graduates in their chosen country (Blacket 1990: 129).*

*Table 8: Growth in undergraduate international student enrolments in Australian Universities in the medical/ health sciences: 1996-2004*

| <b>Field</b>      | <b>1996</b> | <b>2000</b> | <b>2002</b> | <b>2003</b> | <b>2004</b> | <b>%<br/>Change<br/>2003-<br/>2004</b> | <b>%<br/>Change<br/>1996-<br/>2004</b> |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--|--|
| Dental science    | 98          | 124         | 155         | 184         | 227         | +23%                                   | +132%                                  |
| Medicine          | 963         | 1117        | 1287        | 1400        | 1505        | +8%                                    | +56%                                   |
| Medical science   | 41          | 171         | 405         | 788         | 1072        | +36%                                   | +2515%                                 |
| Public health     | No data     | n/d         | 88          | 90          | 77          | -14%                                   | -17%                                   |
| Nursing (basic)   | 762         | 839         | 790         | 1120        | 1623        | +45%                                   | +113%                                  |
| Nursing (upgrade) | 545         | 2336        | 3591        | 4006        | 3109        | -22%                                   | +470%                                  |
| Physiotherapy     | 79          | 173         | 197         | 215         | 239         | +11%                                   | +203%                                  |
| Psychology        | 136         | 335         | 641         | 982         | 1258        | +28%                                   | +825%                                  |

*Source:* Analysis of unpublished DEST statistics on international students enrolments in the health sciences

When the Occupational English Test (OET) for doctors and allied health professionals was introduced in Australia from the late 1980s, the goal was to redress past practice by introducing field-specific assessment for first time (McNamara 1996; 2001). Between 1991 and 1995, with 70% of international medical graduates derived from NESB source countries, 2,079 overseas trained doctors sat the OET at least once.

The impact from an employment perspective was striking. Mandatory English language testing was found to prevent or significantly delay 42.6 per cent of NESB candidates from proceeding to the second stage of the pre-registration process, the Multiple Choice Question examination (Hawthorne & Toth 1996). Differential results were evident by language group, with high pass rates achieved by speakers of Indian languages (84%), Filipino languages (83%) and Arabic (82%), but relatively low pass rates for speakers of non-Arabic Middle Eastern languages (71%), Chinese (66%) and Vietnamese (64%).



As in the field of engineering, English language standards have since been set higher by medical professional bodies, far exceeding the pre-2007 specifications of DIMA (Band 5). IELTS Band 7 (or OET B) has been mandated by Australia's health professions ('Good User') – considered to be the lowest allowable standard for clinical registration, with no other level considered safe:

*Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.*

This level has long been required for permanent resident doctors seeking clinical registration – 2 Bands higher DIMA's 1999+ skill migration 'eligibility' score. In July 2005, moreover, Australian State and Territory Medical Registration Boards expanded mandatory testing to include temporary as well as permanent resident international medical graduates (IMGs), a process since 2006 universally applied to the majority of practitioners. By 2007 English language assessment represented the sole fixed hurdle to Australian practice, in the context of chronic medical maldistribution and undersupply – the main IMG study to date revealing just 41% of incoming doctors to have secured unconditional registration in the first 5 years, but an extraordinary 78% are in current medical employment (Hawthorne, Hawthorne & Crotty 2007). Put simply, to assure essential workforce supply (particularly in regional settings), all other 'mandatory' pre-registration requirements were at risk of being waived.

Former international students are in fact exceptionally well placed in the medical field, compared to offshore applicants, according to an unpublished DIMA survey securing the highest employment outcomes. As demonstrated by a recent study, around 66% of international medical students now convert to permanent resident status (Hamilton & Hawthorne forthcoming<sup>4</sup>). By the time they seek work they have lived in Australia for a minimum of 6 years, supported by the start of their studies by stringent English academic entry requirements (IELTS 6.5 or 7). Virtually all are eagerly sought by employers - in marked contrast to the experience of IT or accounting graduates.

### ***Case Study 5: Nursing***

As is the case with medicine, Australian nursing courses have experienced strong demand from international students in the past decade. By 2004, 3,109 international nurses were enrolled in Australian bachelor degree conversion courses (principally from Hong Kong), with an additional 1,623 students enrolled in full nursing degrees, and 956 in postgraduate courses.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council typically handles around 2,000 credential assessments per year – two-thirds derived from onshore and one-third from offshore applicants (ANMC 2005). In 2004-05, 1,421 skill migration nursing applications were received, up from 969 the previous year. As with medicine, a minimum of IELTS 7 or OET B is currently required for nursing clinical practice or training, reflecting the critical importance of English in engaging with the 'personhood' of the patient. According to senior informants from the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, by 2006 the Northern Territory was the sole exception to this rule (reflecting a separate nurse education agreement with Jakarta). English thus powerfully influences nurses' opportunity to both study in Australia and migrate, in a context where some 5,500 temporary and permanent nurses are currently selected per year, including some one-third who first enter Australia as students.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2006-07 J Hamilton and L Hawthorne (University of Melbourne) completed the first Australian study of international medical students and skill migration, based on current students and recent graduates from 7 medical universities. Several papers will be published shortly.

How well do overseas candidates fare in terms of English language testing, in a context where they are now compelled to demonstrate high level ability? A decade ago just 32% of nurses passed the OET on their first attempt (compared to 57% of doctors). A mere 47% succeeded on one or repeated attempts (compared to 78%). Highly differential impacts by country of origin were again evident, with pass rates as follows for the top 5 applicant source countries: 35 per cent for nurses from the former Yugoslavia, 41 per cent from the Philippines, 50 per cent from Hong Kong, 55 per cent from India and 70 per cent from Fiji (Hawthorne & Toth 1996). (See Table 9.) A study of 1,000 migrant nurses confirmed the link of English language to clinical competence, including the potential dangers to patients if their understanding was wrong. According to one Filipino informant interviewed, for instance:

*(The Director Nursing didn't state what was expected.) The first thing she did was (say) 'Look... let's say you're in a situation where you're in the ward and then you answer the phone... (she pretended to call). You pick up the phone, and then write down what I tell you!' So that's what she did, first thing. So I was so scared... and instead of writing down 'hypertension' I wrote down 'hypotension'... and (later) she said 'Well, you're just above the pass mark,' but she... asked me (about) those mistakes I did, (like) when do you say a patient (has) hyperglycaemic and hypoglycaemic... signs and symptoms... (I)t was a terrible interview, then she was saying, 'Look, can you come back in three months time... because you have to acclimatise yourself!' (Hawthorne 2002).*

Table 9: OET Candidates 1991-1995 - pass rates by region of origin, by field of training

| Region of Origin          | Medicine       |             | Nursing        |             |
|---------------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
|                           | % of all Cand. | % Pass Rate | % of all Cand. | % Pass Rate |
| Oceania                   | 1.2            | 96          | 4.1            | 67          |
| N Eur                     | 0.4            | 88          | 2.4            | 80          |
| S Asia                    | 17.6           | 83          | 6.3            | 48          |
| Former Yugoslav Republics | 3.5            | 82          | 4.9            | 35          |
| S & W Eur                 | 3.5            | 81          | 8.9            | 74          |
| E Eur                     | 5.4            | 79          | 4.7            | 57          |
| Former USSR               | 6.4            | 77          | 2.4            | 76          |
| M East & N Africa         | 14.1           | 77          | 3.7            | 26          |
| S Amer                    | 1.3            | 71          | 0.9            | 20          |
| Africa (ex N Africa)      | 1.2            | 71          | 1.2            | 31          |
| SE Asia                   | 9.0            | 70          | 43.4           | 41          |
| C Amer & Caribb           | 0.6            | 69          | 1.0            | 18          |
| NE Asia                   | 13.0           | 63          | 14.9           | 43          |
| Total (no)                | 2,079          | 78          | 1,038          | 47          |

Source: Adapted from unpublished analysis of Occupational English Test results 1991-1995 for overseas qualified nurses.

As demonstrated by all 5 case studies, high level English language ability is now unequivocally sought by Australian employers.

## 5. CURRENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE ISSUES

Responding to concerns raised by the skill migration review, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) has taken major recent steps to lift English standards. Exemptions from language testing will no longer automatically be allowed for international students seeking permanent residency (given the impossibility of DIAC policing education providers' academic entry and progression standards).

From September 2007 IELTS 6 will become the threshold 'competence' score across all 4 skills (increased from IELTS 5), more nearly approximating Australian employer and regulatory body requirements. Only passport holders from the UK, Ireland, the US, Canada, and New Zealand will be exempt from language testing at the point of migration. Significant bonus points will reward 'proficient' English speakers (25 points for candidates rated IELTS 7 or above, or the OET equivalent), given the problem of defining which candidates should be waived. Moreover liberalised access to post-course visas will facilitate former students' post-course stay, allowing them an additional 18 months to 'gain skilled work experience; improve their English language skills; or undertake a Professional Year' related to their field of study (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007b). Higher migration points will also be provided to Australian graduates who have completed more challenging study: most notably those possessing doctorate degrees (25 points) or 3 year qualifications (15 points).

Measures such as these will not solve all English-related problems however, or prevent former students with inadequate levels being accepted as skill migrants. Additional issues must be addressed in the coming period, the most critical being:

- a. Analysis of international students' future employment and study trajectories (within and beyond Australia);
- b. Assessment of the impact of inadequate English on further Australian study (for students progressing to a second tertiary degree);
- c. Definition of the level of English required for vocational fields and trades (given the growing prominence of these fields in skill migration); and
- d. Development of more effective mechanisms to audit students' English language entry and academic progression standards (including in courses offered by emerging private sector providers).

#### ***a. Analysis of International Students' Future Employment and Study Trajectories***

Minimal current information exists on international students' post-completion study and employment trajectories (once we leave skill migration choices aside). Few databases exist – university/college alumni databases remaining impermeable to national analysis, and recognised as unreliable a few years out. This issue is relevant however, with data gleaned from annual skilled labour net gains/losses reviews commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship confirming sizeable Australia's 'loss' of degree and trade-qualified individuals (particularly recent temporary residents).

While the majority of the Australia-born depart for the UK, the US, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Singapore (part of an estimated 1 million expatriates by 2005 working overseas), the determinants of choices for former students remain unclear. Does the majority wish to repatriate, stay in Australia, or embark on global careers? To what extent do their studies and English language ability define such options, and what has been most useful in the course of their Australian experience?

In 2003-04, for example, 6,966 'long term temporary resident' managers/ administrators left Australia for overseas, compared to 14,560 professionals (most notably 1,415 nursing professionals, 1,373 school teachers, 1,243 computing professionals, 1,000 medical practitioners, 821 university lecturers and 470 accountants), as well as 1,359 associate professionals qualified in the trades. The scale of long-term temporary resident departures had also risen rapidly from 1995-96 (26,229 compared to 8,839), reflecting larger overall flows. The majority left for Europe (particularly the UK, Ireland and Germany), North America, Japan, New Zealand and South Africa), likely to reflect patterns of transnational company employment. Multiple additional destinations were evident however - in terms of engineers, for instance, including 175 temporary residents moving to Hong Kong, 145 to the US and 125 to Singapore, but overall remarkably few Asian destinations given the original source countries of international engineering students (Birrell, Rapson & Smith 2005).

Given the relevance of career outcomes to export education planning and course design, Australia arguably needs better data on international student choice. Further, we need to understand the relevance of English language ability to global options (Marginson & Van Der Wende 2007). In the knowledge economy, evidence suggests, English language competence may be as vital to career outcomes as the quality of course content (Hawthorne 2007). The most recent data from China, for instance, suggests returning graduates from international courses are no longer positively viewed, including those who have qualified in Australia. According to Guo (2007: 14), increasing numbers are unemployed, their negative image 'gradually developed through newspaper reports, TV programs and other mass media', in a context where 'overseas diploma can no longer be converted to Chinese opportunities', and there is growing wariness of the calibre of all skills gained.

### ***b. The Impact of Inadequate English on Further Australian Study***

While the bulk of Australian research on international student outcomes relates to skill migration, it is important to recognise that poor English language ability poses a risk to effective postgraduate study, should international students directly proceed to that from undergraduate courses.

Anecdotal rather than formal evidence exists on this issue, given the proportion of international students following this pathway is small. University of Melbourne data, for instance, confirm a mere fifth of postgraduate international students to have been recruited onshore between 2003 and 2007 – a stable proportion, despite rapid numerical growth. No national summary data could be located concerning this trend. According to an analysis undertaken for the Australian Universities International Directors' Forum (AUIDF) by Mackintosh & Olsen (2006), 40.3% of all international students from 25 universities are currently recruited in Australia. The great majority however enrol after intensive English language training, completion of Foundation courses or Year 12 at school, with only small numbers progressing directly from undergraduate to postgraduate study.

Moreover, examination of DEST student statistics confirms the country of origin of international students to vary significantly by level, with undergraduate and postgraduate flows often derived from different populations (Hawthorne & Vele 2005). In medicine, for example, the top 5 source countries for pre-registration courses by 2004 were Malaysia (536), Singapore (232), Canada (160), the US (87) and Norway (79). The main postgraduate medical student sources however were Hong Kong (116), Malaysia (59), China (45), India (34), and the US (31). Comparable diversity was evident in international nurse course enrolments: the major undergraduate student countries of origin being China (365), Norway (188), South Korea (170), Hong Kong (169), and Japan (75)<sup>5</sup>, while bachelor conversion flows were derived from Hong Kong (1261), Singapore (706), Japan (332), Malaysia (275) and Canada (128).

It is also clear few international students progress immediately to Australian higher research degrees from undergraduate or postgraduate coursework studies. A recent OECD study confirmed just 4.7% of all foreign students in Australia were enrolled at doctoral level, compared to 9.4% in the UK and 18.1% in the US (Marginson & Van Der Wende 2007), with rates in recent decline. By 2003 Australia had attracted a mere 8,855 foreign doctoral students compared to 23,871 in the UK and 102,084 in the US (the US rising from 13.5% to 28.3% of world share in the previous two decades).

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that nurse students from Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea typically enrol offshore in their home country.

No study could be located of the linguistic or academic consequences of international students completing first degrees, then proceeding immediately to graduate courses. Anecdotal cases abound however. For example in one case known to the author, four international PhD students were exempted from English language testing after completing Masters degrees in another state. When formally assessed by their new university on the basis of their written and verbal performance, three were found to have scored IELTS Band 5 – a standard by definition seriously compromising their academic ability to proceed, and indicative of flawed initial ‘academic gatekeeping’.

### *c. Analysis of the English Level/s Required to Work in Trade/ Vocational Fields*

Research is also required on the English levels needed for entry to and progression within Australian vocational education and training courses. As established by the skill migration review, the current economic boom has coincided with the rapid emergence of trade occupations on Australia’s Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL) – the associated bonus points funnelling unprecedented numbers of onshore and offshore applicants into skill migration (Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson 2006). (See Table 10.).

*Table 10: Migration Occupations in Demand List by select year (1999-2007)*

| <b>Year</b>              | <b>Professions</b>   | <b>Trades and Vocational Occupations</b>   |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| <b>1999</b><br>(June)    | IT, Accountancy, Physiotherapist, Registered Nurse, Sonographer  | Boilermaker, Machinist, Pastry Cook, Refrigeration & Air Conditioning Mechanic, Welder   |
| <b>2002</b><br>(October) | IT, Accountant, Hospital Pharmacist, Retail Pharmacist, Physiotherapist, Registered Nurse, Midwife, Mental Health Nurse, Sonographer, Radiation Therapist  | Hairdresser, Cook, Refrigeration & Air Conditioning Mechanic   |
| <b>2007</b><br>(August)  | Accountant, Anaesthetist, Architect, Chemical Engineer, Civil Engineer, Computing Professional - specialising in CISSP, C++/C#/C, Java, J2EE, Network Security/Firewall/Internet Security, Oracle, PeopleSoft, SAP, SIEBEL, Sybase SQL Server; Dental Specialist, Dentist, Dermatologist, Electrical Engineer, Emergency Medicine Specialist, External Auditor, General Medical Practitioner, Hospital Pharmacist, Mechanical Engineer, Medical Diagnostic Radiographer, Mining Engineer (excluding Petroleum), Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, Occupational Therapist, Ophthalmologist, Paediatrician, Pathologist, Petroleum Engineer, Physiotherapist, Podiatrist, Psychiatrist, Quantity Surveyor, Radiologist, Registered Mental Health Nurse, Registered Midwife, Registered Nurse, Retail Pharmacist, Specialist Medical Practitioners (not elsewhere classified), Specialist Physician, Speech Pathologist, Sonographer, Surgeon, Surveyor | Aircraft Maintenance Engineer (Avionics), Aircraft Maintenance Engineer (Mechanical), Automotive Electrician, Baker, Boat Builder and Repairer, Bricklayer, Cabinetmaker, Carpenter, Carpenter and Joiner, Chef, Cook, Drainer, Electrical Powerline Tradesperson, Electrician (Special Class), Electronic Equipment Tradesperson, Fibrous Plasterer, Fitter, Floor Finisher, Furniture Finisher, Furniture Upholsterer, Gasfitter, General Electrician, General Plumber, Hairdresser, Joiner, Lift Mechanic, Locksmith, Mechanical Services and Air-conditioning Plumber, Metal Fabricator (Boilermaker), Metal Machinist (First Class), Motor Mechanic, Optical Mechanic, Painter and Decorator, Panel Beater, Pastry Cook, Pressure Welder, Refrigeration and Air-conditioning Mechanic, Roof Plumber, Roof Slater and Tiler, Solid Plasterer, Sheetmetal Worker (First Class, Stonemason, Toolmaker, Vehicle Body Maker, Vehicle Painter, Wall and Floor Tiler, Welder (First Class) |

Source: Adapted from tables prepared by Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2005), updated with Department of Immigration and Citizenship web-based data (August 2007).

By 2006 the MODL was strongly influencing international student demand for Australian courses: vocational enrolments surging by 25.7% between 2005 and 2006, compared to just 5.2% in higher education and 19.2% in ELICOS courses. (See Table 11.)

Within the above context, the most recent Australian assessment confirms:

*Between 2002 and 2006, the number of overseas students commencing vocational courses in the services, hospitality and transport field nearly quadrupled, from 4,516 to 17,869. Most of the growth took place between 2004 and 2006 when total commencements increased by 167 per cent, or 11,181. Based on recently released DEST statistics, this field accounted for 64 per cent of total international commencements growth in the VTE sector between 2005 and 2006. This growth was concentrated overwhelmingly in courses run by non-government or private training providers, which attracted 87 per cent of additional commencements between 2004 and 2006 (9,757 out of 11,181). The non-government sector had an 80 per cent share of all overseas student commencements in these fields in 2006 (Birrell, Healy & Kinnaird 2007: 30-31).*

Given the momentum of this enrolment trend, with substantial numbers of international students possibly attracted to easier/ cheaper migration-related courses, it seems essential to redress the dearth of research on the English levels required for safe and effective trade practice. While the 2006 skill migration review advocated adoption of IELTS Band 5.5, this decision was not empirically based. Rather the panel noted that ‘appropriate commissioned research concerning the employment level of English (i)s required (likely to vary by trade field, as recognised in 1993 in the Occupations Requiring English)’. In particular, important differences are likely to be found between the levels required for beauty and hospitality workers (eg in hairdressing), compared to those whose work involves higher order training in the context of public safety (eg electricians).

*Table 11: Trends in international student demand by sector (2006)*

| Sector           | 2005           |                | 2006           |                |
|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                  | Enrolments     | Growth on 2004 | Enrolments     | Growth on 2005 |
| Higher education | 163,779        | 8.1%           | 172,297        | 5.2%           |
| VET              | 66,556         | 12.7%          | 83,685         | 25.7%          |
| ELICOS           | 64,998         | 5.1%           | 77,468         | 19.2%          |
| Schools          | 25,156         | -8.0%          | 24,717         | -1.7%          |
| Other            | 25,590         | 0.1%           | 25,651         | 0.2%           |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>346,079</b> | <b>6.4%</b>    | <b>383,818</b> | <b>10.9%</b>   |

Source: ‘International Student Numbers Continue to Grow’, Department of Education, Science and Training (March 2007)

#### ***d. Capacity to Audit English Language Entry/Teaching Standards in Tertiary Courses***

Quite apart from international students’ field of study, it is important for the education sector to re-visit the issue of packaged visas – an option acknowledged as attractive to students and providers alike, yet one frequently based on unrealistic assumptions regarding the speed of language acquisition. As indicated by previous sections, guaranteed enrolment of students following short ELICOS courses may be perceived to pressure institutions to ‘teach down’ then subsequently simply pass students (Watty 2006; Bretag 2007). Students with entry scores as low as IELTS 4.5 for Australian Qualification Framework 3 (vocational education) or IELTS 5.0 (for higher education) may currently proceed to further courses without external testing being required – ‘flowing through’ at whatever level 20 weeks of English instruction has provided.

As confirmed by English Australia, substantial numbers of international students are 'nowhere near the target levels in this period of time'. Moreover, some reportedly complete less than the English training prescribed: educational providers rather than DIAC being responsible to monitor this, with no certain governance of the process. Minimal research has assessed the academic impacts of this to date. According to a range of informants however, 'it would be to Australia's benefit to open access (to better English training) for international students at point of entry and tighten it up at the point of entry to receiving institution' (Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson 2006: 108). This issue deserves adequate research and policy attention.

Within Australia's fast transforming export education industry, it is further clearly important to define improved strategies to audit the English language entry/ progression standards adopted by providers. International students have been able to choose between University, Registered Training Organisation (RTO) including TAFE, Foundation, Secondary and ELICOS courses – the first two leading directly to skill migration options.

While the recent skill migration review affirmed Australia's commitment to quality provision, including 'world's best practice' in terms of the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act*, the potential to compromise English standards in terms of academic entry, progression and exit was noted, particularly in relation to emerging providers. States impatient of 'red tape', and committed to becoming primary destinations for international students, concede the impossibility of investigating standards for each course, in a context where there may be 1,000 RTOs in a single state, with just five public servants monitoring performance. Site visits at point of accreditation and renewal are the norm (after 5 years). Intervening checks however largely occur if time and resources allow. Within this period 'scope of practice' may change, affecting the delivery of a defined course in a specific discipline. There is scope for international student problems to 'fall between the cracks', including in relation to English standards. According to a senior Victorian State government official responsible for quality assurance<sup>6</sup>,

*We're all operating in this self-interest circle and migration is fuelling it... You've got a large number of people whose task is to sell at any price. If an institution is unscrupulous and profit-driven enough it has the potential to do all kinds of things... Audit systems don't pick up a lot and international students are unlikely to complain. The government recognises there is light regulation appraisal, and has a chosen assumption that you're dealing with scrupulous providers... (But) RTOs for example are meant to have their head office in the state where they're operating. If they start working in the same state or another state under a different name, they can avoid being audited by terminating their own (earlier) operation (Birrell, Hawthorne & Richardson 2006: 101).*

Conflict of interest has clear potential to affect provider practice in areas such as selection and admission, granting of credit for prior academic study, provision of in-course support and progression, and warrants careful monitoring.

It needs to be noted that the new Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) 2007 arrangement which came into operation in July 2007 is intended to provide stronger safeguards against such operators. It encourages greater participation of stakeholders in ensuring the quality of training, and will also achieve greater national consistency through new standards for state and territory registering bodies. Outcomes-focussed audits will ensure RTOs focus more on the quality of the outcomes of their training and assessment, which in turn will give industry greater confidence in the outcomes of training.

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<sup>6</sup> By agreement with DIAC, no individual government officials interviewed for the 2006 skill migration review were identified by formal position or name, a condition of them speaking freely. However this source was interviewed at length by the author, and held high Victorian government status.

This will allow for increased vigilance, if necessary, in the auditing of the English language entry/ teaching standards of particular providers. The introduction of the outcomes focussed AQTF 2007 is therefore a timely and welcome development as aberrant practices have the potential to affect external perceptions of the quality of Australian education, as evidenced by recent media stories.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

While governments frame education and immigration policies, it is employers who retain the power to offer or withhold work. As demonstrated by this paper, there is now compelling evidence to suggest that international students' English ability affects the perceived calibre of their training, accreditation status, employment, and remuneration outcomes. Within the knowledge economy, where 52% of international students convert to permanent resident status and stay, this has marked impact on skill migration program outcomes. Further, inadequate English competency diminishes students' capacity to participate directly in further study.



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