PATHWAYS – PREPARATION AND SELECTION

« 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).

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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.

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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.

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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 about the English language competence of international students, 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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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper aims (1) to identify what we know and do not know about the efficacy of Australian English language and academic pathway programs and English language proficiency tests used by international students to gain entry into higher level studies in Australia; (2) to consider quality assurance matters; and (3) to identify priority issues for consideration by the international education industry.

Pathways, including English language pathways, are a feature and indeed strength of Australia's international education offerings. Progression through pathways to higher level study has proven to be a very popular mode of entry for international students coming to Australia, and indeed for domestic students.

It can be argued that preparatory programs that allow for direct entry are meeting the needs of students entering their main course through a more comprehensive development of English language and academic preparation skills required as opposed to simply gaining a language proficiency test score minimum.

It could also be argued that the disadvantage of such programs lies in the lack of standardised framework for reporting requirements and outcomes. Currently there is no national framework for establishing and monitoring learning outcomes in ELT.

Some recent research and commentary, including in the Australian media (subsequently reported in some of the overseas media) has drawn attention to alleged failings in the practices of Australian institutions in the selection, admission and teaching of international students.

One possible response is to move to require all international students, onshore and offshore, and regardless of the pathway they are taking to achieve at least an overall band score of, for example, 6.0 on an IELTS test to enter higher education institutions. Is this the right approach to setting English entry standards in higher education?

What do we know about how the academic performance of international students is affected by their level of English language competence on entry? The results of research on IELTS and TOEFL tests scores as predictors of academic success tend to be equivocal and there is no clear, correlation between test scores and academic success.

Is it preferable to have a single, common measure of English proficiency such as IELTS or to have a variety of acceptable entry standards which have been equated?

To date, studies around the issue of comparative English language and academic performance of international students are modest, frequently localised to a particular institution and are generally based on small sample sizes. There are very few large scale studies tracking the performance of international students entering institutions through a variety of English language pathway programs. Almost all existing studies focus on the university sector. There is a dearth of information available for VET and schools.

The need to monitor the learning outcomes and assessments for students in a wide variety of preparatory programs is clearly a priority quality assurance issue. Would the introduction of national external benchmarking help here? What form should this benchmark take?

Existing models of national assessment frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) may not have value in the Australian context. Moreover, mandating adoption of such a national framework for the ELT sector would probably be neither feasible nor desirable. It might be more appropriate to focus on less ambitious and more concrete solutions such as creating a national EAP certificate for intermediate and advanced proficiency levels whose end-of-course assessments would need to be appropriately moderated/quality assured at a national level to ensure confidence in it.

The factors affecting successful performance are multiple and the role of English language competence levels needs to be more clearly identified if policy and practice are to be properly informed. Further research should include consideration of how much improvement in English proficiency can be expected both in preparatory courses and at the end of higher level studies as well as the relationship with other knowledge and skills areas where improvement is also desired.

The paucity of research studies that investigate correlations between test score and academic success or that compare the outcomes on various pathway programs limits an informed debate on a complex set of issues.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to identify what we know and do not know about the efficacy of Australian English language and academic pathway programs and English language proficiency tests used by international students to gain entry into higher level studies in Australia; to consider quality assurance matters; and to identify priority issues for consideration by the international education industry, starting with the *National Symposium: English Language Competence of International Students* to be held on 14 August 2007 in Sydney.

The paper is not a research paper. However, it does draw on existing research to inform the identification and discussion of critical issues. Although there are likely to be gaps, the paper provides a useful, evidence-based starting point for an effective, forward looking discussion at the Symposium.

2. PATHWAY MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS

Selection and admission into higher level studies in Australia in the VET and higher education sectors involve two types of distinct but overlapping requirements – (1) the requirement to meet the stipulated minimum academic standards to enter the institution and the course sought and (2) the requirement to meet the stipulated minimum English language proficiency and. Pathway programs provide a diverse, flexible and some would argue an equitable way for international students to meet these two-fold requirements where they do not immediately satisfy these academic and English requirements.

Pathways, including English language pathways, are a feature and indeed strength of Australia's international education offerings. Progression through pathways to higher level study has proven to be a very popular mode of entry for international students coming to Australia, and indeed for domestic students.

The broad aim of pathway programs is to bring international students, having a variety of backgrounds, knowledge and skills, up to a level where they are ready to enter their chosen course of study.. In particular, English language pathways in the ELT sector, generically known as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English language bridging programs, are widely used to prepare and orient students to participate in the language and academic culture specifically required for further studies. These courses differ from IELTS preparation courses which generally aim to improve the four English macro skills sufficiently to meet the minimum prescribed minimum IELTS scores of a particular institution or one of its pathway programs.

AEI data reveal that more than a quarter of international student enrolments and commencements in Australia in the period 2002-2005 occurred through a combination of English language pathways such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or Intensive English Language Testing System (IELTS) preparation programs and study pathways such as Foundation and Diploma courses offered by the VET and higher education sectors (AEI, 2006b).

These pathways have developed within the Australian setting as a result of the unique cross-sector accrediting system established within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The AQF recognises fifteen categories of qualification linking the school, VET and higher education sectors under a single system, thereby facilitating ease of transfer from one sector to another (Fiocco, 2006).

Pathway programs, including ELT courses, are by their very nature developed to cater for students having a wide range of educational backgrounds. This is part of their strength from a marketing/recruitment perspective but also from an equity point of view allowing students with diverse backgrounds to move through the system.

To the uninitiated the landscape of pathways, including English language pathways, is a complex one. The options for an international student are diverse. The issues associated with this complexity of offerings are numerous, not the least those associated with quality assurance.

A typology of pathways programs allowing international students to meet one or both of these necessary requirements may be described as consisting of three broad categories:

1.   **Stand Alone English Language Courses (e.g.   EAP, Bridging English, General English)**

These courses may be offered by a range of stand alone ELT, VET and higher education institutions and colleges which may also be associated with parent VET and higher education providers. Requirements for entry to these courses vary considerably and may depend on an IELTS score or internal diagnostic tests or both. Australian institutions vary in the expectation they have of these courses, and of the scores or other assessment outcomes they require for selection and admission. For example, admission requirements could range from an overall pass to a credit grade, or could require a particular grade or level of achievement in one component (e.g. a research essay or project requiring a credit).

ELT course levels are expressed from elementary to advanced but, as will be noted below, there is no external comparability of learning outcome standards between providers of ELT courses. In addition, they are generally outside the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

Equally EAP or institutional English bridging courses may vary in learning outcomes. These are frequently in-house and most institutions would claim to monitor learning outcomes and to track student progress. Indeed, a number of institutions do this.

2.   **Pathway Courses Designed to Meet Both English Language and Academic Requirements**

There are a variety of pathways under this category.

In the schools sector, Year 12 programs aim to meet both English language and academic entry requirements through English medium study in an English speaking country. All Australian states except South Australia require English as a compulsory subject in Year 12. In many instances a specialised English as a Second Language (ESL) subject is available and many international students take this as part of meeting formal entry requirements into higher levels study.

At the VET sector level, and as part of the AQF, Certificate IVs, Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas and Associate Degrees also articulate to higher education studies. All these pathway courses require some form of minimum English and academic achievement for entry. The qualification accepted varies depending on the selection and admission policies of the higher education institution and on the course match between the pathway award and the higher education award targeted. The degree, if any at all, of advanced standing granted is a further complicating factor.

There are numerous tailored Certificate IVs and Diplomas that are designed to smoothly articulate to higher education offerings and these are heavily frequented by large numbers of international students. These Certificate IV courses are usually similar to Foundation Studies in content and they frequently include an English language component that focuses on higher education communication skills. Some higher education institutions will not accept a Certificate IV for direct entry and insist the student completes a Diploma before articulating into an undergraduate degree course. Other institutions may accept a Certificate IV but with separate evidence of English.
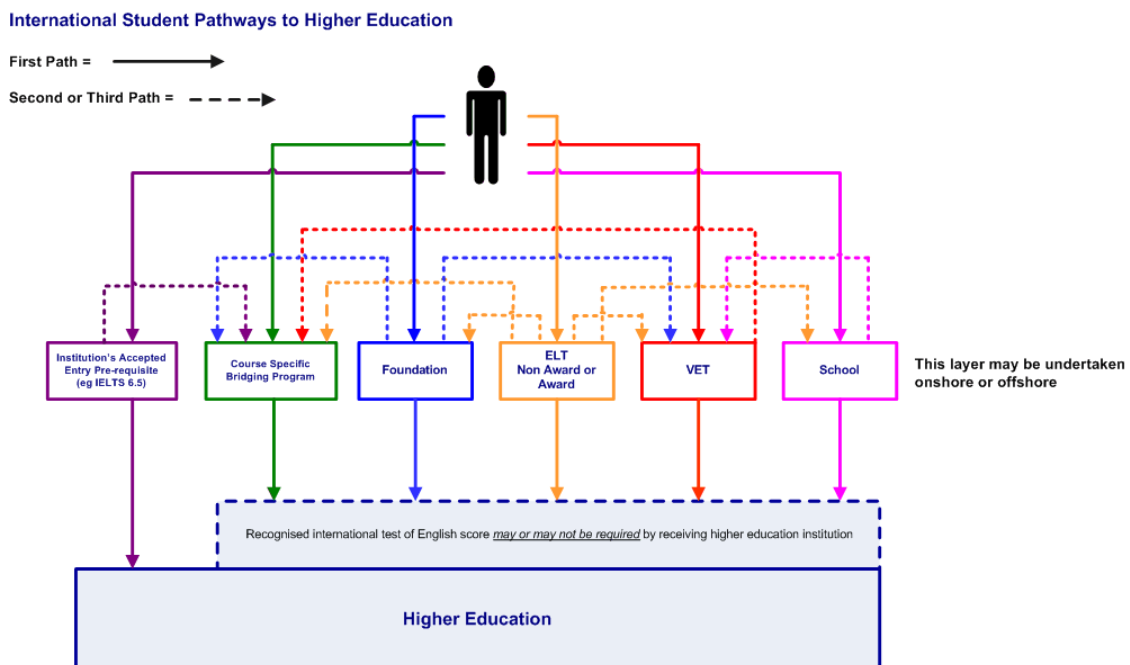
3.   University English Language and Foundation Programs

As self accrediting institutions, universities are able to design and deliver their own English language and Foundation Study programs. Typically these programs will focus on academic English skills as well as content which will ensure the student reaches minimum academic requirements.

All courses under these three categories themselves require some form of minimum English (and possibly also academic) standard for admission. There are a wide variety of such requirements.

[Note: Australian pathway programs may be delivered onshore and offshore. International education pathways have become increasingly hybrid in that pathway programs have become a strong feature of Australian transnational education. These bring additional issues of quality assurance given that they operate in the main in non English medium environments. The focus of the present paper is onshore pathways. However, many of the points made below apply also to pathway programs delivered offshore.]

The diversity of pathway programs and their schematic relationship to one another and to higher education are conveyed by the diagram below.

International Student Pathways to Higher Education

First Path =

Second or Third Path =

| Institution's Accepted Entry Pre-requisite (eg IELTS 6.5) | Course Specific Bridging Program | Foundation | ELT Non Award or Award | VET | School | This layer may be undertaken onshore or offshore |

Recognised international test of English score *may or may not be required* by receiving higher education institution

Higher Education

Key Messages

- There is a wide variety of pathway offerings under the Australian system and these may appear confusing.

- There are multiple test and non test English language pathways into formal education.

- The typology and the quality assurance issues associated with particular pathways are complex.

- There is a lack of understanding of the complexity of pathway programs (onshore and offshore) and of the wide variety of risks and benefits associated with different pathway programs.

3. ENGLISH LANGUAGE PATHWAYS AND SELECTION

In many instances, international students may not be required to undertake a formal test of their English level prior to entry into their course of study. For example, while most VET courses may formally require an entry level of 5.0 IELTS, completion of a specific course in English may be agreed to by the receiving institution as adequate. Likewise, a university may accept students who have completed a specific program of study without having to undertake a formal test of English. An international student may enter the education path as a student in a school without requiring a formal recognised test of English and then complete year 12 and proceed, like a domestic student, into university. Such pathways are often referred to as 'direct entry' programs.

Many institutions have developed their own programs of study that allow for direct entry to a specific course(s) or they may have liaised on the development of such programs with other institutions or they may have come to an agreement with other institutions that offer a program that the receiving institution deems acceptable. Some institutions assume a level of English has been achieved through the pathway that the student has undertaken. For example, a student may complete a course of English that is deemed by the receiving institution as equivalent to IELTS 5.0 which then allows entry into a Diploma course of study with a VET provider which in turn allows entry into the second year of a university's undergraduate degree program.

It can be argued that preparatory programs that allow for direct entry are meeting the needs of students entering their main course through a more comprehensive development of English language and academic preparation skills required as opposed to simply gaining a test score minimum. Many programs are designed specifically for a receiving course and therefore equip the student with a comprehensive skill set directly related to their future study which a recognised international test of English does not provide.

At the same time, it could be argued that the disadvantage of such programs lies in the lack of a standardised framework for reporting requirements and outcomes which may or may not result in the student reaching an English level equivalent to an IELTS 5.0 or 6.0. It is widely assumed that 10 weeks of intensive English language instruction will assure a student of improving their proficiency by the equivalent of 0.5 of an IELTS band.

However, this is not necessarily the case. Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) examined the progress made by 112 students in Australia and New Zealand studying pre-university intensive English over a 10-12 weeks period. Students sat an IELTS test at the beginning and end of this period. They found that the *average* amount of improvement over this period was 0.5 of an overall IELTS band but that there was strong variability amongst the students with some making no progress at all. In addition, it was found that the more proficient students improved less on the IELTS test than the less proficient students. Using data collected from questionnaires and interviews with students and teachers, they found that the reasons for improvement (or the lack of it) included motivation, accommodation, self-confidence and the extent to which students used or accessed English outside the classroom, not simply how many hours of actual instruction were undertaken.

Many direct entry programs of English study vary in length – depending on a student's entry level – and vary in content from one provider to another. In the interests of common exit standards it may be desirable to set a national curriculum that all providers are required to adhere to, through to the development of standards reflecting minimum teaching qualifications, course length, content areas and assessment requirements.

Key Messages

- In many instances, international students may enter a school, VET or higher education institution through pathway programs without completing a formal test of English. The student will be "deemed" to have met the institution's English language requirement.

- Foundation and AQF related pathways frequently have multiple objectives to suit the academic and English language requirement of receiving institutions.

- There are no common exit English standards for pathway programs that allow for direct entry to a main course of study (e.g. Foundation Studies).

Key Issues for Discussion

- What is the best way to improve confidence in the exit standards of the wide variety of pathway programs?

- Should exit performance from pathway programs include a formal test of English language proficiency?

- Should exit performance from pathway programs include statements of English language competence?

- Should there be specific standards set for all programs that allow direct entry to receiving institutions?

- Should each receiving institution insist upon a pre-requisite program of study such as an EAP course?

4. INTERPRETING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTS

The nature of English language tests needs to be clear if the issues associated with their use are to be properly understood.

It is important to distinguish between a language achievement and a language proficiency test for an understanding of what English language tests are as well as what they can and cannot measure. A proficiency test is:

> "A test which measures how much of a language someone has learned. Unlike an achievement test, a proficiency test is not based on a particular course of instruction" (Davies, et. al, 1999)

Proficiency tests are therefore designed to measure a candidate's overall English ability independent of any particular course of learning. Whether doing an IELTS preparation course actually makes a significant difference to an individual's IELTS scores is very under-researched. If it really did then the IELTS test would no longer be a proficiency test but an achievement test. The primary function of a proficiency test is to predict whether an individual is ready to cope in a given target domain, in this instance, a course of study delivered in the medium of English. The choice of cut-off score required will depend on the complexity of the linguistic demands made by the course i.e some course will be more linguistically demanding than others.

The final assessment for direct entry ELT or Foundation English programs (whether it includes a test or not) is based on what has been learned in the course and therefore has a primarily achievement (or retrospective) focus. In this sense the assessment is narrower than a proficiency test which aims to measure general ability in the language. However, these assessments also have a predictive function similar to a proficiency test. An important disadvantage of the achievement assessments (including any end of course tests) currently carried out by teachers in direct entry programs is that they are not subjected to external monitoring. While some such assessments may be moderated within the centre, they nevertheless do not relate to a national system or framework of standards.

Proficiency tests like the IELTS are normally large-scale, validated testing instruments. Scores on the different versions and different administrations of the test, at least in principle, can be meaningfully compared. This is not the case with direct entry courses delivered in different centres – there is no common syllabus or assessment used in such courses or common language levels to describe learner proficiency.

The key problems then are to do with the equivalence of results across a) different direct entry courses (potentially removable through having externally monitored national standards) and b) between these courses and proficiency test scores (much more difficult to resolve but not impossible). The point is that neither issue has been systematically researched.

There are of course also a large number of other developments and issues associated with proficiency test scores that impact on quality assurance. These include the enormous growth of IELTS test preparation courses and their impact on test scores; issues of 'test cramming'/rote learning and the extent to which test scores therefore genuinely reflect proficiency; country rater/test centre reliability; an apparently growing instance of a mismatch between IELTS score results and English competence once a student enters an EAP course; and not the least, security of tests and test results. It is not possible to do justice to these matters within the scope of this paper. However it is important to underscore their importance for quality assurance and confidence in the efficacy of the pathways using standardised tests for assessment of language competence.

Key Messages

- The distinction between the assessment of proficiency and achievement in relation to English language competence does not appear to be well understood

- IELTS and similar large-scale validated testing instruments are tests of English proficiency. "Direct entry" ELT and Foundation courses have a primarily achievement focus.

- An assessment of proficiency assesses an individual's overall ability in the language with the aim of predicting how well s/he will cope within a particular course of Emglish-medium instruction. An achievement assessment assesses how well an individual has mastered the knowledge and skills learned in a particular course of study.

5. ENGLISH LANGUAGE ENTRY STANDARDS AND PRACTICES

In the Australian context, IELTS is currently the most widely used and trusted measure of English proficiency by both government and educational institutions. The test consists of four different modules in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Candidates receive an individual score between 1 and 9 on each of these modules as well as an overall band score (the adjusted average for the four modules).

A description of each of the overall band scores from 1 - 9 is provided by IELTS as guide to interpretation.
For example:

> *"IELTS 6.0 = Competent users.*
>
> *They have generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracy, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. They can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations."*

Under Australian immigration law, to acquire a student visa to directly enter an institution in Australia an international student offshore must achieve a specified minimum overall band score on the IELTS Test, as well as satisfy specified academic requirements. The overall band score may vary for different sectors (schools, VET, higher education) depending on the Assessment Levels of different countries. The regime and its sector specific requirements are transparent but complex.

For example, to acquire a student visa to directly enter an institution in Australia an international student from Assessment Level 3 and 4 countries must achieve a specified minimum overall band score on the IELTS. The overall band score varies between sectors (for example: Assessment Level 3 country requirement for applying for a visa for higher education is 6.0 IELTS or an overall band score of 5.0 IELTS plus a maximum of 30 weeks ELT.

Some Australian institutions, especially universities, set their English proficiency entry level on, for example, the IELTS Test higher than the DIAC's prescribed minimum of an overall band score of 6.0. This is because an IELTS 6.0 does not necessarily mean that a student will be able to cope with the linguistic demands of a particular course of study.

As indicated earlier, a significant proportion of students in pathway programs moving to higher levels of study may be admitted to the higher level institution without needing to meet a formal requirement of taking an IELTS test and achieving the specified minimum band scores. These students are generally admitted on the proviso that they meet other accepted "standards" of English proficiency through their pathway studies, e.g. Foundation Studies English, VCE ESL or "direct entry" intensive English programs (ELT). In addition, many VET and higher education institutions accept evidence of previous secondary or tertiary levels studies completed in the medium of English in Australia or overseas as satisfactory evidence of English proficiency.

It is relevant to note here that onshore pathways students do not need to achieve a score on an independent, standardised English language test to obtain a higher education visa as they do not apply for the visa from overseas. Some might regard this situation as anomalous.

Some recent research and commentary, including in the Australian media (subsequently reported in some of the overseas media) has drawn attention to potential failings in the practices of Australian institutions in the selection, admission and teaching of international students. Birrell (2006) reported that 34% of onshore international students who were granted Australian permanent residence in 2005-6 did not achieve an overall IELTS score of 6.0 at the end of their course of study. This raises the important question of how these students gained access to higher education in the first place. In particular, the implication is that English standards on alternative preparation programs are too low.

Included below are the minimum English entry requirements for two institutions, the University of Melbourne and Holmesglen TAFE as illustrations.

English Entry Standards at the University of Melbourne

English entry standards are framed in terms of current English proficiency on a standardised test; previous achievement in English studies; or other studies where English was the medium of instruction

No direct distinction is made between whether English is an applicant's first or second language

Most commonly used evidence of English are:

- Australian or NZ Year 12 English (including VCE ESL)

- Trinity Foundation Studies English for Academic Purposes (for UG study)

- Number of years spent studying previously in an English medium institution

- Standardised proficiency testing (IELTS, TOEFL)

...cont.

The measures of proficiency and eligibility for admission in each case are varied:

VCE ESL

- Residents of Australia for less than 7 years at the start of Year 12
- English has been the student's major language of instruction for less than 7 years
- Based on the English Study Design
- Achievement test (teacher-based and final exam)
- Aims to develop competence and use in English for post-secondary school purposes
- Linked closely to the English study design and focuses on developing students' English language skills within the curriculum content.

Foundation Studies

Trinity students are guaranteed places at the University of Melbourne if they:

- Receive a specified average grade (including prerequisite Foundation Studies Programs)
- Successfully meet English for Academic Purposes (EAP) requirements as set by faculties
- Focus on learning English for academic purposes
- Prepare overseas students for university
- Allows time for cultural adaptation within the context of university study

Years spent studying in an English-medium context

Applicants must have satisfactorily completed studies in:

- At least the first year of an English medium tertiary course in the last two years; or
- At least a two-year English medium tertiary degree within the last five years

Standardised Proficiency Tests (minimum scores)

IELTS
Undergraduate: overall 6.5 with writing 6.0
Postgraduate: set for individual courses, between 6.5 and 8.0

TOEFL
Undergraduate:
  Paper based test: score of 577, including 4.5 in the TWE
  Computer based test: score of 233, including a 4.5 Essay Rating
  Internet based test: score of 90 including 21 in Writing

Postgraduate: set for individual courses, between 577 and 610 on the paper based test, etc.

English Entry Standards at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE

English language minimum entry standard is IELTS 5.5

Most commonly used evidence of English competence are:

- Standardised proficiency tests (including IELTS, TOEFL, ISPLR, TOEIC)

- English test results in selected overseas senior secondary examinations

- Number of years spent studying previously in an English medium institution, including at university level

VCE ESL is not accepted.

The Strengths and Limitations of Standardized Test Scores

There are clearly advantages and disadvantages in using IELTS and TOEFL Test scores for selection and admission purposes.

On the advantage side, IELTS and TOEFL offer independent, standardised measures of English proficiency. Moreover, IELTS provides tests for four different and important macro-skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. IELTS results are reported in simple numerical terms, both for each of the four sub-tests and overall.

On the disadvantage side, numerical scores suggest a level of psychometric precision they don't really possess. They are only estimates of readiness to enter higher education and other levels of study with limited predictive power. At the same time, the meaning of test scores may not be well communicated or well understood by test result users (O'Loughlin, in press). Some might say the tests themselves promote test cramming. And some might also say more generally that testing of language proficiency, like IQ, is complex and controversial, and that test scores should therefore be regarded with some degree of caution.

Who has the responsibility for monitoring the use and application of IELTS test scores for admission to education institutions? It is clear the responsibility lies with the receiving institutions themselves as suggested by the American Educational Research Association and the International Testing Commission:

> *...the ultimate responsibility for appropriate test use and interpretation lies predominantly with the test user.* (AERA *et al*, 1999: 112).

> *Competent test users ... will interpret results appropriately, communicate the results clearly and accurately to relevant others and review the appropriateness of the test and its use.* (ITC, 2000:1)

Key Messages

- The Australian student visa regime is transparent but complex, including in respect of sector specific English language requirements.

- Institutional entry requirements are set by the receiving institution – in all sectors, these generally specify a formal test of English such as IELTS.

- An IELTS band score of 6.0 does not necessarily mean the student is equipped with the skills required to undertake formal study in, for example, a university degree.

- There are advantages and disadvantages in referring to formal tests scores.

- Many schools, VET and university providers accept students into a main course of study after the student has completed a program of study without requiring a recognised formal English language test result.

- There are no set specific standards for programs that allow direct entry to a main course of study and the programs that allow entrance into main courses are varied in content and length.

- The majority of English Language Training (ELT) delivered in the ELT sector does not fit into the AQF framework in terms of quality, curriculum and outcomes. However, there are examples of courses successfully using the AQF framework. Currently ELT courses are not recognised as leading to vocational or professional outcomes, nor are they covered by any other national framework apart from NEAS standards, which do not define learning outcomes.

Key Issues for Discussion

- What are the priorities for further research to examine the English competency needs and academic performance of international students going on to further study via pathways programs?

- Should there be uniform English language entry levels for institutions in the same sector?

- Should onshore student visas be conditional upon the student achieving a specified minimum score on an independent, standardised test of English?

- Should a formal test score alone allow entry to an institution or should it be accompanied with a specified period of English language skill building, e.g. IELTS 6.0 plus a bridging program or EAP course?

- Should a formal test score such as IELTS be required upon completion of a main course of study as opposed to an entry assessment tool?

- Should each receiving institution insist upon a pre-requisite program of study such as an EAP course?

6. INCOMMENSURABILITY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ENTRY STANDARDS

Broadly three types of evidence of English language proficiency are being equated by a great majority of education institutions:

(1) Completion of a particular course of study - for example, senior secondary studies, Foundation studies, Certificate or Diploma studies, or completion of an EAP or other Direct Entry program of study that the receiving institution has previously agreed to in terms of content and length.

(2) The number of years spent studying previously in an English medium institution (duration of study).

(3) Standardised proficiency testing (IELTS, TOEFL, ISLPR) (results not based on any specific course of study are taken as the measure of proficiency).

How has this happened? Essentially, there have been two important but potentially conflicting aims in creating entry requirements:

(1) The need to have a measure of English proficiency.

(2) The need to recognise courses of study through which in effect students develop both their academic English and study skills within an Australian context before commencing higher education.

The incommensurability of outcomes on the wide variety of English language tests and other assessment mechanisms raises questions about the validity of the various English language proficiency and/or assessment measures in use by institutions. In terms of quality assurance this is worrying.

What is the rationale for the acceptance by many Australian institutions of equivalence between an IELTS score of 5.5 and a TOEFL score of 527 (or a Computer based TOEFL score of 197)? Similarly, on what basis do some universities accept the internal exit test scores of their partner ELT institutions as equivalent to the university's publicly stated IELTS entry score requirement?

There have been limited attempts within and beyond institutions to equate English language proficiency levels across the range of instruments and measures currently being used by Australian institutions (e.g. between IELTS and the wide variety of EAP, bridging and foundation programs). While many institutions publish "equivalence tables" to describe their admission requirements to prospective international students, the basis for these "equivalences" is difficult to justify. This is because for essentially commercial reasons, no formal, publicly accepted "equivalences" exist. As AESOC notes:

> "ELT courses cannot be formally pegged to IELTS or TOEFL because they are proprietary trademarks and prohibit the use of equivalency tables (AESOC, 2005).

Students entering higher level study via study pathways may in fact achieve what is sometimes regarded as "non-test entry".

> "Such students are entering the unknown with unspecified and unmeasured language and learning skills, entry usually being gained on the basis of a very broad range of prior educational experiences" (Leask et al, 2003).

For some practitioners, to categorise assessment in a Certificate, Diploma, Associate Degree and University Foundation Programs as less rigorous than a proficiency test is unfair and misleading. While it is true to say that an English proficiency test score is not required upon exit from such courses, it could be (and is) argued that students have more effectively demonstrated their English language readiness for further study through satisfactory completion of such a course rather than through attaining a specified English proficiency score,

Public confidence in English language pathways and selection processes within Australian institutions may be called into question when there is no agreed and widely disseminated set of score equivalences for the major international English language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. Confidence could be further eroded by a perception of possibly fluid equivalence arrangements between institutions and ELT providers which might appear to allow direct entry by students through other than formal test regimes.

Without clear research evidence about the comparability of the wide variety of entry pathways and admission scores being operated, the disquiet sometimes expressed by some teaching staff about the language capability of their students cannot be dismissed.

The failure to compare outcomes on various pathway programs, especially ELT programs, and the lack of agreed national frameworks for English language test score and program comparability, raise significant quality assurance issues. A great deal of research into IELTS and other English tests has been sponsored or conducted by the organisations owning these tests. When national policy judgements, institutional decision-making and public confidence are all at stake, it is prudent for the issues to be independently researched. Independent, comprehensive benchmarking studies across the different instruments and measures currently in use by Australian institutions need to be undertaken.

In summary, is it preferable to have a single, common measure of English proficiency such as IELTS or to have a variety of acceptable entry standards which have been equated?

While it is possible to try to answer this question based on current institutional understandings and experiences, there is clearly also a need for better information on which to make a final judgement. Two kinds of studies at least are needed:

(1) Benchmarking studies across different measures (e.g. IELTS and for example the wide variety of EAP, bridging and foundation programs used within individual institutions).

(2) Tracking academic performance of students who have entered particular courses via different pathways.

Key Messages

- The incommensurability of outcomes on the wide variety of English language tests raised serious questions about quality assurance in the use of a variety of test scores for selection purposes.

- Comparability is hampered by the commercial, proprietary nature of standardised tests (IELTS, TOEFL), etc.

- Public confidence in the comparability of test scores is undermined by their incommensurability.

7. ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

What do we know about how the academic performance of international students is affected by their level of English language competence on entry?

To date, studies around this issue are modest, frequently localised to a particular institution and are generally based on small sample sizes. There are very few large scale studies tracking the performance of international students entering institutions through a variety of English language pathway programs. Almost all existing studies focus on the university sector. There is a dearth of information available for VET and schools.

As Arkoudis and Starfield point out in their Discussion Paper for the present Symposium, recent large cohort studies of the performance of international students in Australia and the UK detect no substantial difference in the overall performance of international students when compared to domestic students. In the Australian case, the large-scale study by Mackintosh and Olsen (2003) found that overall there was no significant difference between the performance of Australian and international students in the courses/units attempted. The study did not however consider the language background of the students.

Delving more closely however, Arkoudis and Starfield conclude that the available studies in the UK and Australia suggest that international students may be less likely to achieve upper level passes at the degree level (Morrison *et al*, 2005), (University of Technology Sydney ELSSA Centre, 2001).

The results of research on IELTS and TOEFL tests scores as predictors of academic success tend to be equivocal. Dooey (1999), studying the performance of students at Curtin University of Technology, argued that there was a poor correlation between academic performance and test scores:

"*students who came in with IELTS scores below the cut off point would have been assessed individually by the matriculation committee...and despite being considered at risk they generally succeeded*".

Bayliss and Ingram (2006) examined the use of IELTS as a predictor of student language behaviour rather than of academic success. They found that proficiency scores could predict language behaviour and that because IELTS measures only language proficiency, it is just one of many variables that influence academic success. They point out therefore that "it is not surprising that attempts to correlate test scores with subsequent academic results have been inconsistent in their outcomes". They list a range of studies that showed no link, whilst others have found "generally positive (although sometimes weak and inconsistent) correlations between IELTS entry levels and GPAs".

In a recent evaluation of a 'direct entry' English course for postgraduate international students with an IELTS score of 6.5 (7.0 being the minimum entry level required by the relevant Faculty) O'Loughlin and Bailey (2007) found that over a third of completing students failed to achieve the normal IELTS requirement of 7.0 (when tested at the end of the course for auditing purposes) but were nevertheless highly successful in their subsequent university studies. They concluded that:

> *"there appears to be little correlation between lower IELTS scores (i.e. 6.5 or less) and academic results for FELC (Faculty English Language Course) graduates at Hawthorn English Language Centre, Melbourne University... This finding suggests that higher English language proficiency may not always be essential for academic success. It also indicates that for some students, an improvement in English language proficiency from IELTS 6.5 to 7.0 over the course of the FELC / EAP is an unrealistic expectation".*

In summary, there is a need for better, large scale tracking studies of the performance of international students who have undertaken a wide variety of English language pathways. The factors affecting successful performance are multiple and the role of English language competence levels needs to be more clearly identified if policy and practice are to be properly informed. Further research should include consideration of how much improvement in English proficiency can be expected both in preparatory courses and at the end of higher level studies as well as the relationship with other knowledge and skills areas where improvement is also desired.

Key Messages

- There are very few large scale studies tracking the performance of international students entering institutions through a variety of English language pathway programs.

- Most studies focus on the university sector, there are very few studies focusing on schools and VET.

- Those large scale Australian and UK studies that exist tend to suggest that international students may be less likely to achieve upper level passes at the degree level and that English language difficulties may be an issue at this level.

- Research on IELTS and TOEFL tests scores as predictors of academic success tend to be equivocal in their findings

- There is a need for better, large scale tracking studies of the performance of international students who have undertaken a wide variety of English language pathways.

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8. ENGLISH LANGUAGE ENTRY REQUIREMENTS AND COMPETITOR COUNTRIES

Much of the discussion above suggests there is a need for improvement in the understanding use, comparability and quality assurance around standardised English language tests and various pathways assessments used for selection and entry of students into higher level study.

However, it is not prudent for institutions and policy makers in Australia to consider this matter in isolation. While neither standardised tests nor alternative pathway assessments are perfect, the reality is that English language entry standards in Australia are strongly influenced by the global education marketplace.

Just as many Australian institutions allow for a specified formal English test score as an entry requirement or an assessment taken as 'equivalent' for a direct entry program, so too do many institutions in other countries, for example the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

Although Australia's minimum entry requirements on standardised tests such as IELTS may be considered by some to be too low, they are similar to those used by Canada, Britain and the United States of America, countries with which Australia competes fiercely for international students. In comparison with the U.S. there is actually greater uniformity in overall entry requirements for institutions in Australia. In the U.S., where substantial reliance is placed on TOEFL test scores, the paper-based TOEFL test entry score required for admission to a university may vary from 500 to 600.

Alternatively, teacher assessed pathways are increasingly being used to attract international students by Australia's major competitor countries. Raising the minimum entry scores on standardised English language tests or abolishing alternative pathways could reduce Australia's ability to compete in the international student market and could threaten Australia's market share. This cannot be ignored in any discussion about standards and quality assurance for Australia's English language preparation and selection policies and practices. Unless there is more cooperation between the various English-speaking countries seeking to attract international students, English language entry standards may be vulnerable to being lowered by market forces.

Key Messages

- Australia is not unique in the way its institutions allow for a variety of entry processes.

- No other English speaking country has a national mandatory English language requirement or curriculum framework that is required to be completed before entry to main course of study.

Key Issues for Discussion

- Should Australia position itself as a country that requires tougher entry requirements on average in comparison with its competitor countries?

- Should Australia reflect greater variances in entry requirements?

9. ELT QUALITY ASSURANCE

The National ELT Accreditation Scheme Limited (NEAS) is a quality assurance mechanism that covers management, finance and administration, premises, specialist staff, student services, curriculum, student assessment, materials and equipment, recruitment and promotion. The focus is assurance of minimum standards in these areas. NEAS does not have the authority or responsibility to monitor the English language competency of international student exiting ELT centres or to assess the practices/quality assurance of tertiary institutions accepting international students.

It also needs to be noted that when offered overseas ELT courses can operate outside any formal quality assurance framework benchmarked against Australian standards. In its response to the Department of Education, Science and Training Discussion Paper entitled "A National Quality Strategy for Transnational Education and Training" (DEST, 2005a). English Australia expressed the view that "*under the current arrangements, there is no accountability for non-award English language programs delivered offshore*". Whilst this was the case in 2005, NEAS has since accredited two offshore ELT Centres (IDP's Australian Centre of English in Cambodia and the Indonesia Australia Language Foundation (IALF) in Jakarta). Nevertheless, the majority of Australian ELT programs offered overseas can function without requiring any external quality assurance audits along the lines provided by NEAS. It also goes without saying that no common assessment framework exits for Australian offshore ELT programs.

In this context however, it should be noted that the Transnational Quality Strategy (TQS) will promote quality in the provision of Australian education and training overseas, including ELT. A List of Australian education and training providers, who meet Australian domestic quality assurance arrangements and agree to deliver courses to a comparable standard overseas will be established and actively promoted internationally. The TQS will use NEAS standards as the underpinning quality framework for the ELT sector on an interim basis, pending agreement to a national quality assurance framework for the sector.

Elder and O'Loughlin (Elder and O'Loughlin, 2007) identify a range of currently prevailing problems and issues relating to entry and exit levels of ELT courses and their assessment by internal placement tests. These include the application of inconsistent standards; a lack understanding about assessment; continuous assessments and tests that are not sufficiently related to the curriculum; teachers who are reluctant to use explicit criteria and continuous assessments; and tests that are not appropriate for the students' proficiency level. In fact, there are no common exit standards in ELT that are monitored by an independent body

At the outset, two matters should be recognised. Firstly, assessment of language outcomes is not peculiar to Australia. Australia in fact has a reasonably comprehensive quality assurance system for many aspects of ELT which goes considerably further than QA regimes in other countries.

Secondly, externally moderated standards are an issue applying not only to ELT but to "non-test" pathway programs such as EAP, English Bridging and Foundation Programs. And while Year 12 English standards are moderated at the state level there may be a need for a more national approach here too.

Because ELT training operates at all levels and across all education sectors, English Australia and others argue that to achieve national consistency a quality assurance framework should be developed and administered by a single national body such as NEAS (English Australia Submission to DEST May 2005).

The issue of a common assessment framework has been examined by Elder and O'Loughlin who argue that while the Australian ELT industry is respected globally for its professionalism and the vast majority of registered providers are accredited by the industry's quality assurance body, the National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS), the sector now encompasses a diverse range of providers.

> "The diversity of courses and assessment practices amongst these providers has raised the question of whether there is a need for a common framework of standards for describing and/or assessing English proficiency at entry and exit from ELT courses (Elder and O'Loughlin 2007)".

Foundation and intensive English programs regularly attract students who have not achieved the IELTS result they need to enter their higher level course of first choice. It can be argued that rather than learning English or doing test preparation courses in-country, where English is not the language of communication, these students are being better prepared through English and study skills development programs in Australia. However, this does not negate the need to monitor rigorously the assessment of students in these preparatory courses. Would the introduction of national external benchmarking help here? What form should this benchmark take?

An example of an existing framework is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR). It is designed to provide a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner (Council of Europe, 2004). It is doubtful, however whether a framework such as the CEFR would be workable or would have value in the Australian context. The UK ELT industry has not taken up the CEFR and faces the same issues as the Australian industry.

Moreover, Elder and O'Loughlin reported in their study that while 76% of Directors of Study surveyed were positive to the idea of a common assessment framework, many "gave a mixture of positive and negative views when asked to explain their initial response". Positive views included a recognition of transparency, portability and objectivity which a common framework would provide, as well as enhanced professionalism, quality and credibility for the ELT field. Negative views included the perceived inflexibility and homogenization that a national framework might entail as well as its possible impracticality and possible redundancy. Other possible disadvantages might be cost and resources to develop and deliver the framework as well as a lack of staff expertise, at least initially, in using standards appropriately.

There have already been moves in Australia to review and evaluate learning outcomes from direct entry ELT courses with a view to making any necessary improvements. English Australia for example, is currently in the process of developing a 'good practice' document which identifies features that characterize good practice in the provision of programs that provide direct entry from English language to VET or higher education (undergraduate and postgraduate). It aims to provide guidance to EA colleges seeking to establish and maintain quality practices in this area.

Existing models of national assessment frameworks such as the CEFR may not have value in the Australian context. Moreover, mandating adoption of such a national framework for the ELT sector would probably be neither feasible nor desirable. It might be more appropriate to focus on less ambitious and more concrete solutions such as creating a national EAP certificate for intermediate and advanced proficiency levels whose end-of-course assessments would need to be appropriately moderated/quality assured at a national level to ensure confidence in it. This certificate could presumably form part of the AQF. It would have a common syllabus and assessment that direct entry ELICOS and possibly Foundation EAP courses could adopt in the interests of common entry standards. It could also have several different exit points: VET, undergraduate and postgraduate. An issue to be considered is which national body should be responsible for moderation and quality assurance of end-of-course assessments.

Key Messages

- There is no accepted assessment framework to determine language progression or learning outcome in place in the ELT sector in Australia or in the equivalent sectors in Australia's competitor countries such as the UK.

- Under current arrangements, and apart from AQF accredited language programs, there is no accountability for non-award English language programs delivered offshore.

Key Issues for Discussion

- Should there be uniform English language entry standards for institutions in the same sector?

- Is there is a need for a common framework of standards for describing and/or assessing English proficiency and competence at entry and exit from ELT courses?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of a common national assessment framework and what would need to be done to achieve its development and adoption?

- How could a national quality assurance framework be designed and operated given the complexity and variety of pathway programs (ELT, foundation programs, schools, etc.) and the different character and interests of providers and various levels, both public and private?

- What would be the characteristics of the best kind of framework to meet Australian needs? What areas would it focus on (general English, academic English, workplace English)? How many levels should it have? Where would it be used (placement, certification, exit assessment, end of level assessment, curriculum planning, self assessment)? How would it be implemented, moderated, and monitored for reliability and consistency?

- Should ELT outcomes at the senior secondary school level be better measured and monitored? Who has responsibility to do this?

- Should a nationally accredited, externally monitored EAP Certificate be established? What form would such a certificate take? What body should be responsible for quality assurance of end of course assessments?

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