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## Issues of English language proficiency for international students

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ISSUES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS

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STUDENT NUMBER: [REDACTED]

**This portfolio is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of**

**Doctor of Education**

**Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences  
School of Education  
Edith Cowan University**

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## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## **ABSTRACT**

In the last 20 years or so, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of international full-fee paying students applying to study in Australian universities. The revenue provided in this way has helped to address the problems faced by cash-starved universities facing recurring funding cuts over the same period. Furthermore, the presence of such students on any university campus provides immeasurable enrichment to the student body in terms of cultural diversity and research potential, and indeed it is very tempting in an ever-increasing global market, to be as flexible as possible with prospective international students. However, the process of admission also demands careful consideration on the part of the various stakeholders involved. Although several factors need to be taken into account, the most obvious and certainly of primary importance would be the need to prove proficiency in the English language. Given that English is the dominant means of communication in the university, all students are required to draw from a complex web of linguistic resources to construct meaning and to complete the range of tasks required of them during their tertiary studies. This volume deals with the overarching theme of issues of English language proficiency for overseas students studying in an Australian university. This focus can be viewed from many angles, and there are certainly many key facets involved, a selection of which is explored in the papers of the portfolio. These include the following broad areas: recruitment and admissions, language testing and technology, curriculum and inclusivity, English language support, academic conduct and finally, the specific needs of international students, as viewed from their own perspective.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the proportion of funding provided by the Australian government to universities has decreased. This has had dramatic effects on the way they are run, on the workloads of academic and general staff, and not least, on the students themselves. Like universities in other developed nations, Australian universities have also been forced to find different ways of generating income to compensate for the shortfall in government funding. One of the ways in which this shortfall can be made up, at least to some degree, is by accepting more overseas full-fee paying students. While financial considerations were not the only reason for the dramatic increase in the number of international students studying in English-medium universities, certainly the introduction of full-fee paying places for international students in the late 1980s provided a catalyst for Australian universities to open their doors to international students from various destinations.

The presence of such students on any university campus provides immeasurable enrichment to the student body in terms of cultural diversity and research potential, and indeed it is very tempting in an ever-increasing global market, to be as flexible as possible with potential international students. However, the process of admission also demands careful consideration on the part of the various stakeholders involved. Although several factors come into play here, the most obvious and certainly of primary importance would be the need to prove proficiency in the English language. Given that English is the dominant means of communication in the university, all students are required to draw from a complex web of linguistic resources to construct meaning and to complete the range of tasks required of them during their tertiary studies. This volume deals with the overarching theme related to issues of English language proficiency for overseas students studying in an Australian university. This focus can be viewed from many angles, and there are certainly many key facets involved, a selection of which is explored in the papers that follow. These include the following broad areas: recruitment and admissions, language testing, curriculum and inclusivity, English language support, academic conduct and specific needs of international students (as viewed from their own perspective).

Two elements have driven this interest: one is my own background as an administrator of IELTS, and more specifically emerges from a previous study I had undertaken investigating the predictive validity of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test at Curtin University of Technology (Dooey & Oliver, 2002); the other is a more pragmatic one, namely my current teaching situation where I am involved with overseas students from non-native English speaking backgrounds. These students have English language proficiency levels that are considered inadequate for direct entry into their mainstream course at the time of application, and it is part of my role to prepare them for study (either graduate or post-graduate) at Curtin. These students are required to successfully complete the one-semester English Language Bridging Course, before being eligible to enter their chosen mainstream course.

The last twenty years or so have seen tremendous changes in policy shift both in Australia and overseas, regarding the ways in which universities can offer places to overseas students. The first paper of this volume begins by tracing the chain of historical events leading to the current position regarding international students studying in Australian universities. The pressure to recruit such students has created fierce competition in the global marketplace, with the targeted destinations expanding each year. The main focus of this paper is on the need to maintain quality in an increasingly competitive environment. Three factors which have the potential to erode this quality are explored; firstly, universities in many developed countries are encouraged to be entrepreneurial, and generate their own revenue. As a consequence, economic constraints put pressure on those universities to offer more full-fee paying places, most of which will come from international students. The irony is that this creates a spiral effect, in that the more they rely on revenue from those students, the less is forthcoming from government coffers. Secondly, universities need to work much harder to satisfy the discerning market by offering diversity in their programmes, flexible delivery and the provision of courses in offshore locations. This has required positive relationships with all of the partners involved in order to ensure quality and maintain appropriate standards. In situations where these relationships fail, the quality suffers too. Finally, lack of English proficiency can be an inhibiting factor when students are admitted into courses for which they are not prepared. For students to be ready to cope in an English-medium academic environment, the capacity to do so cannot be measured on the basis of a proficiency test alone. This is a double-edged

sword, for on the one hand, there are minimum standards to be reached before international students can even commence their studies, but on the other hand, the attainment of such scores is only a starting point in their progress towards academic literacy. This fact needs to be clearly communicated to potential students for whom a required score on an English language test such as IELTS is the final frontier along their arduous journey onto a degree course in an Australian university. In other words, it represents the beginning, rather than the end.

In addition to satisfying academic entry criteria, all students must provide some recognised form of evidence of English proficiency upon entry to their degree course. The importance of using a robust, non-culturally specific English language test designed for non-native speakers of English became evident in the late 1980s. Until then, many Australian universities either used the US-based TOEFL or a locally-available test, such as the SST (Short Selection Test) which was used by Curtin. Alternatively, they simply constructed their own. It was not until 1989 that IELTS was established jointly by partners from the UK and Australia, offering students a truly international standardised English language test aimed primarily at those wishing to work or study in an English-medium environment. Currently, IELTS and TOEFL (in that order) are the two most commonly accepted tests of English language proficiency used for admission to Australian universities. With the rapid advancement of technology, the 1990s saw a move towards Computer Assisted Tests, or CATs, and the TOEFL test was mounted solely on computer in 1998, while an optional computer version of IELTS is due to be launched in 2005. The second paper reviews a number of studies (based mainly around the TOEFL test) which look at the issues raised in offering computer-based tests as compared to the traditional pen-and-paper versions. The importance of construct validity and issues of access and equity are highlighted, whilst at the same time the increasing variety of backgrounds from which our overseas students are originating, is kept in mind.

Once the major hurdle of achieving the minimum language score to enter university has been overcome, international students often mistakenly believe that their English is now 'good enough'. Often they are not aware of the fact that the process of developing literacy for an academic environment, in a new culture, has only just begun. At the same time Australian universities operate under a monolingual system where mastery of the English language is the key to success. However, such mastery goes far beyond simply

reaching a minimum score on a language test. Most universities are often (at least initially) willing to exercise some flexibility with regard to students' English proficiency, however, there is also a need for ongoing English language support throughout the student's academic life. Secondly, even where minimum language thresholds are met, what is not always taken into account is the fact that the sociolinguistic and cultural models which dominate life in western universities usually present a stark contrast to those to which our overseas students have been accustomed, for undergraduate students in their schooling, and for postgraduate students, in their previous tertiary study experience.

Most universities have made substantial inroads towards internationalisation both at a policy level and at a curriculum level. However, in practice, faculty members are frequently unaware of the complexity of the task of mastering the raft of language-related skills needed to cope with everyday tasks at university. The third paper looks at issues of English language proficiency and beyond, and deals with the types of academic and cultural/social problems generally encountered by international students studying through the medium of English in a western university. This paper argues that internationalising the university curriculum goes beyond simply filling places, and it offers some practical suggestions about offering a truly international education for all students.

In relation to more specific language problems faced by international students, much attention has been focussed on the four macro-skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking; in fact, those are the skills tested by IELTS. A review of the literature indicates that the skills of writing and reading have been the subjects of more extensive investigation than listening and speaking. The fourth paper provides a review of a number of research projects undertaken in the US and in Australia, which examine the listening and speaking needs of NNS students in mainstream courses in English-medium universities. These include large-scale surveys and interviews with both students and faculty staff. Also in this paper is a report on a small-scale research project I have undertaken with students and staff of the English Language Bridging Course (ELBC) at Curtin. This was a small replication of one of the large-scale studies reported earlier in the chapter. The purpose of the study was to ascertain the perceived listening and speaking needs of ELBC students, both from their perspective and from that of their lecturers (all ESL/EFL specialists), and to examine the extent of the relationship between these two sets of perceptions. One common thread emerged both here and in several of the studies reviewed. This was that NNS students

(particularly the newer arrivals) often struggle not just with their academic tasks, but with general listening skills, and that (unlike ESL/EFL specialists) faculty lecturers are frequently unaware of the need to modify their content and delivery appropriately for students whose first language is not English. The importance of being able to offer coping strategies to both students and faculty was stressed, and from the university's perspective, those suggestions would certainly be useful for native speaking (NS) students as well.

In the context of globalisation, education is becoming a more marketable commodity with physical, political and cultural boundaries across the world becoming more flexible and more open to the exchange of skills and knowledge. In addition, education through English is seen as a very valuable asset in the global world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a result of this, students from a wider range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds are vying for places in English-medium universities worldwide, and the competition to deliver education in a global society is indeed a challenge. The fifth paper in this volume examines some of the consequences of globalisation and the implications for Australian universities. In particular, the problems associated with English language proficiency and intercultural communication are explored, with particular reference to the literature available on such issues for the current student body. A set of interviews was undertaken with one group of 13 students from a range of language backgrounds who had just completed the English Language Bridging Course in Semester 2, 2003. The purpose of this study was to find out the students' views on the effectiveness of the course in preparing them for their mainstream studies. The results of this study are reported with the students' comments classified according to recurring themes identified in the literature. At the time of the study, it was felt that, since they had not yet commenced their mainstream studies, they were not in a position to accurately pinpoint the specific skills that they were going to need. Therefore all agreed to be interviewed again after having completed at least one semester in mainstream. Of the 13 original interviewees, one student opted not to take up his mainstream course, returning home for family reasons. The remaining 12 returned for the second round of interviews eight months later. The results of the latter study are reported in the final paper.

Therefore in the document to follow there are six related, but also distinct papers, as listed below:

1. Maintaining quality in the global higher education market.
2. Language testing and technology.
3. Internationalising Australian universities: the issues involved.
4. Investigating the listening and speaking needs of international students.
5. Globalisation and the international student body.
6. Tertiary education in Australia: the international students' perspective.

Because the papers are discrete, a separate list of references and appendices is provided after each one. Linking each paper is a small commentary summarising my reflections of that just given and explaining how I was led to my focus for the next.

## **LINKING COMMENTARY:**

### **INTRODUCTION TO PAPER 1**

The setting of this first paper in many ways represents my teaching career at Curtin University in Western Australia, from the time I commenced in 1987 until the present day. During this period, the genesis of the 'aid to trade' focus had occurred in the context of overseas students. China was just beginning to open her doors and to allow students to travel to Australia for further education.<sup>1</sup> As the range of courses available to overseas students expanded at Curtin, it became an attractive option for many South-East Asian students. In turn this led to the establishment of the Western Australian testing centre for IELTS at Curtin in 1990. Concurrently my professional life at Curtin has taken me through a range of courses, including ELICOS and Foundation Studies. In addition, during most of this time I have been involved in various ways with the IELTS test, starting with my training as an examiner in 1990, then moving on to Administrator in 1993, and Senior Examiner in 1996.

During this time I have encountered many hundreds of students from a range of backgrounds, including a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and also academic and professional experience. Even so, all these students have one thing in common: their first language is not English. This experience of teaching these students has given me an insight into the challenges and problems they have faced in the process of their education at Curtin. Above all, it has led me to the strong belief that these students need to get value for their investment, and once given the chance to study, they should be given every opportunity to succeed in their quest to obtain a quality qualification.

This first paper came about because of my reaction to students' dogged determination to succeed, both in their English language skills and in their tertiary studies. The course I teach - the English Language Bridging Course (ELBC) provides them with a range of English-related skills which seem to prove most valuable once they enter mainstream, even though many initially question the requirement on the basis of the extra burden it places on them in terms of time and money. Unfortunately many other overseas students bypass such a preparation course because when they apply, they meet the

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<sup>1</sup> This was of course prior to the Tiananmen Square events which later caused serious aftershocks for this group of students



minimum English language proficiency score even though for many (according to the test developers' guidelines), further support will be needed. As a result, many overseas students are left to their own devices, simply because they have met admissions criteria and therefore are deemed suitably equipped to cope with their course.

Despite this, there is no shortage of reporting in the press of inadequate English language skills among international students in Australian universities, also of soft marking and generally 'dropping of standards' to accommodate NNS students. At the same time faculty members are also put under pressure to pass a certain number of students. Certainly there is a tension - the pressure to admit and graduate students who provide valuable financial resources. The question I address in this paper is whether the cost of this situation is to be paid with quality. It is my contention that if Australian universities are to maintain their hard won reputation for being world class, then the quality of their degrees should not be threatened in the face of economic pressure, market demands, and above all, lack of English language proficiency.

## **PAPER 1**

### **MAINTAINING QUALITY IN THE GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION MARKET**

The closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed unprecedented changes in the nature and scope of higher education worldwide, while universities in countries where English is the medium of instruction (in particular, the U.S., the U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Canada), increasingly became the chosen study destination for students from non-English speaking backgrounds seeking further education. Factors contributing to this phenomenal trend included the relaxation of visa restrictions, a growth in the spread, use and application of the English language (largely through the mass media), extended access to information and increased opportunities for travel. In addition, changes within the federal education policy in Australia in 1985 allowed the introduction of full-fees for international students. This represented a formal shift from an aid-oriented system in the international education sector, to a policy based on international trade (Marceau, 1995, p.11). Education had become less of a service to the community, and more of a commodity to be traded and marketed, with the added focus on internationalization.

Following the federal government's 1993 policy shift, publicly funded institutions were encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity to compete openly in the international market. This would not only provide increased, or more accurately alternate funding for the institutions, but it would also serve to stimulate the economy and provide jobs for the Australian industry (Kendall, 2004, p. 25). While the growth occurred somewhat spontaneously after that time, it became evident by the turn of the millennium that reaping the benefits of such growth was one matter, but what emerged as an increasing challenge was higher education's ability to sustain and maintain that growth, to keep up to date and respond to current market trends, and most importantly, to offer world-class quality to potential students. Although in the move towards internationalisation, attempts have been made to recognize the non-commercial benefits of offering education to students from overseas, the challenge for institutions in the new millennium is to compete fiercely in an ever-demanding marketplace, but to do so with a quality product. This includes quality of courses and of students, but most importantly, to ensure a match between students' and institutions' expectations about this quality.

Further, and related to this is the issue of globalization in higher education. As Altbach and Davis (1999, p. 1) indicate “While academic systems function in a national environment, the challenges play themselves out on a global scale”. This highlights the fact that across the world in various universities, higher education is becoming more global than national, especially given that more and more opportunities exist for international student movement and exchange. It is also highlighted in the fact that, of the 38 universities in Australia, all but one include an internationalisation policy in their mission statement and their corporate plan. Not only is internationalisation part of the corporate plan, but the focus of Australia’s international activities is global (Back, Davis & Olsen, 1997). According to Marginson and Considine, (2000, p. 46) “Australian universities now operate as global businesses, whether through global distance education or through off-shore campuses, collaborative projects with international universities and governments, or deals to franchise courses and enter ‘twinning’ and ‘feeder’ arrangements”.

In this global education context, service providers need to be sensitive to the needs of the clientele if they are to cope with the demands of the marketplace. This means looking beyond national borders to a global consumer base, where discerning customers are availing themselves of more information than ever before, and making informed choices, which involve making overseas study commitments of two to three years and beyond. While this represents a lucrative market for cash-starved higher education institutions in countries like Australia, the competition in the market is such that universities need to make themselves attractive by tracking market needs, right through from the decision making process, to the delivery of a quality service, in a manner flexible enough to suit the consumer. However, one of the consequences of the growth of the international education market, according to Marginson (2002, p. 36) is that “foreign student revenues have made possible a further decline in government funding, which has put quality under pressure”.

A research study entitled ‘Global Student Mobility 2025’ undertaken by International Development Programs (IDP) Education Australia found that there were some 115,000 international students at Australian universities studying onshore, a number which could rise to 850,000 by 2025. Although this represents a phenomenal increase in demand for places in Australian universities, Ms. Lindy Hyam, the then Chief Executive of IDP, also cautioned that Australia would have to improve its relative position in a globally competitive environment, warning that “to realize this growth scenario, Australia would

need to increase the perception of *quality of education*, employment prospects, lifestyle, and education accessibility” (IDP Education Australia, 2003a, p. 1, emphasis added).

Quality, of course, has different meanings when viewed from different perspectives and by different stakeholders. “Since it is clear that the term ‘quality’ is inherently a value judgment, based on the needs and perspective of the person making the judgment, any analysis of quality in higher education which relies solely on one view or another would be excluding many other equally valid viewpoints” (Higher Education Council, 1992, p. 9). Furthermore, quality is not easy to measure, and it may be perceived differently in different cultural settings. At the policy level, “very diverse quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms for higher education are in place in different OECD countries” (Larsen & Vincent-Lancrin, 2002). Therefore in the international context, the challenge of the new millennium will be to bridge the gap between student needs and expectations, and the service that is delivered, without compromising standards; in other words, the quality both of courses and of students must be maintained.

Quality assurance is indeed formally addressed in policies relating to higher education in Australia. While this includes international students, it does not necessarily take into account the fact that the formal education (content, lectures) is just one aspect of education for many international students. When they enrol at an Australian university they make an investment for a number of years in their overseas education, and as a consequence, most view it within the broader scope of an educational experience in a western environment. This paper will argue that in the context of international students studying at Australian universities, quality must not be eroded in the face of economic constraints, market demands and limited English language proficiency, and that with regard to quality, there is a need to match reality and perceptions.

### **Quality and Economic Constraints**

From the 1980s onwards, cutbacks in government funding for higher education appear to have pushed universities in some developed countries, for example, Britain, Australia and Holland to become more entrepreneurial (Bok, 2003, p. 8). Slaughter and Leslie (1997) describe changes in universities in four countries, Australia, Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. where there has been a shift in the focus of university life, from empirical research, to more entrepreneurial activities, in what they term ‘academic capitalism’. “In other words, universities and faculty had to compete – engage in marketlike behavior – for

critical resources” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 17). While this process has involved a range of strategic initiatives, such as developing partnerships with industry for research and training, and creating products and processes suitable for the market, one of the ways in which Australian universities have responded to the challenge is by being more creative and competitive in their bid to generate funds, and this includes increasing the number of places available to overseas, full-fee paying students.

In this regard, Australia has been quick to respond to the new market, and is currently the third largest international student destination in the English-speaking world, behind the U.S. and the U.K. The economic value to Australia of the global international trade in education is considerable. For example, in 2002, Australian universities collected more than AU\$1.2 billion in fees from international students. Such is the revenue produced by this market, that Central Queensland University, Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia and RMIT University each received more than 20% of their revenue from international students in 2002 (DEST, 2003). In addition to onshore places for overseas students, many are also taking advantage of the opportunity to study offshore through a range of flexible delivery options now on offer. It is now estimated that the international export sector contributes AU\$4.2 billion to the economy, making education the nation’s third-largest export sector and one of the top 15 exports overall (IDP, 2003b). Having established this strategic position, it is crucial that Australia maintains its place and its reputation in an ever-growing competitive market.

To maintain its competitive edge it is important that the temptation to succumb to the lure of commercialization does not prove too powerful. In other words, universities need to be mindful of the fact that international students are not just ‘cash cows’. While they provide welcome revenue, it may also be necessary to reinvest some of that revenue in academic/English support, so that quality standards are maintained. In a paper entitled ‘The Phenomenal Rise of International Degrees Down Under’, Marginson (2002) described a dependence for revenue upon foreign students, on the part of Australian universities, adding that “as every addict knows, once patterns of dependence become established, they are hard to break” (p. 36). Marginson also referred to the price advantage which favoured the Australian market in two ways; firstly, after the Asian monetary crisis of 1997/98, potential students shifted their focus from U.K. or U.S. destinations to the ‘cheaper Australian institutions’. Secondly, lower costs of living, and cheaper and shorter degrees have proved attractive.

A recent survey by the Australian department of education found that the tuition of an Australian MBA is only half the American public university average, and average living costs are 70 percent of United States and United Kingdom levels. Australia also offers an opportunity cost advantage; its baccalaureate degrees and PhD programs are three years long, compared to four years in the United States, and the master's coursework has been shortened from two years to little more than one. (Marginson, 2002, p. 39)

While there is no doubt that there is tremendous pressure to use commercially viable avenues to survive financially, this could lead to compromises in quality, and the use of a competitive (as opposed to a collaborative) approach between institutions globally, for their common good. What is necessary is to “maintain a desirable balance between cooperative and competitive activities in the same market” (Tangas & Calderon, 2004, p. 127), and to do so whilst maintaining quality.

Finally, competition within markets such as this one is always a healthy pursuit, but while compromising quality to stimulate competition might in the short term be beneficial, in the long term the cumulative effect would be disastrous, and reductions in quality would also damage the reputation of an institution.

### **Quality and the Decision Making of Higher Education Consumers**

Global demand for international higher education is forecast to grow from 1.8 million international students in 2000 to 7.2 million international students in 2025 (Bohm, Davis, Meares & Pearce, 2002, p. 3). Australia now has 10 per cent of the global market share for international students (Buckell, 2003). In order to successfully market and recruit overseas students, it is crucial to understand the factors affecting supply and demand when estimating the extent of the global market for international education. These factors are frequently referred to as the ‘push/pull’ factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001; Mazzarol, Soutar, Smart & Choo, 2001; Altbach, 1991). In this case, the ‘push’ refers to the factors initiating the outflow of students, particularly from developing countries, while the ‘pull’ refers to the factors that make a host country attractive to international students. Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2001) summary of the key ‘push’ factors included “the level of economic development in the source country, capacity of the source country’s domestic education system to meet demand, per capita incomes and size of the employment market within the source country for professionally educated graduates” (p. 17). On the other hand, the ‘pull’ factors related largely to the economic, political support (aid, scholarship), and

relationships between the two countries. It was suggested that “educating institutions seeking to recruit overseas students should consider the impact of the various ‘push and pull’ factors and the nature of the source countries they are targeting with their marketing efforts” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001, p. 17). Above all, prospective students want and expect to return to their home countries with a quality degree.

Mazzarol and Soutar conducted extensive surveys with students from Indonesia, Taiwan, India and China, and suggested that “an important starting point for developing segmentation and positioning strategy is to understand the nature of different types of student groups and how they make selection decisions” (2001, p. 134). They found that there was a reversed hierarchy of destination selection between undergraduates and postgraduates. For example, in this case, undergraduates chose the host country first, followed by the host institution, and finally the study discipline, while the exact opposite was the case for postgraduates. This has obvious implications for marketing. More importantly, however, Mazzarol and Soutar (2001, p. 145) found that “In the field of international education, the student-customer is driven more by perceptions of quality or value than by price or cost.” While the cost is certainly important, value for money seemed to be more important, with higher costs seen as an indication of better quality. Once again, the notion of quality is defined largely in terms of its perception, and is best estimated (in the context of overseas students at least) in terms of the factors that influence the decision-making process, and the degree of satisfaction they experience.

Given the importance of perceived quality in the decision making process of where to study, it is first necessary to understand the factors that influence these perceptions. For the majority of Australia-bound overseas students, in particular those from South-East Asia, reputation is very important, and the best medium for transfer of information is word of mouth. Students are typically influenced by family and friends; “recommendations from friends and relatives, or the knowledge that a friend or relative has studied at a particular institution are positive motivators in the final enrolment decision” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001, p. 100). Image is most important, and universities position themselves to portray a particular image, and to maintain that image, and in the main make sure that the reality lives up to the reputation. In this sense, the marketing process must be followed through, so that the product is successfully delivered, and in this way potential students are assured of satisfaction. Furthermore, most of these students are unaware of the exact nature of the educational experience they are facing; therefore they rely on accurate marketing and from

it develop expectations of the institution in question. For example, overseas students are made aware of the fact that English language support is available in a formal sense, but rarely do they realize that they need to engage with the language in the wider sense; for example a range of accents is represented among lecturing staff (some of these NNS themselves) and in some courses, the content assumes local knowledge, which often comes from reading newspapers, listening to radio and generally interacting with locals. In the case of Curtin, specific examples of this are documented in a later paper in this portfolio.

Environmental factors are also important in the decision making process. These refer to the overall environment of the institution, and the broader environment in which the institution is set. Although the institution has no control over the quality of the latter, it can capitalise on the positive aspects of the study destination as a whole. For example, many overseas students view Australia as having a good climate, being a safe destination, and having good access to a range of services. In addition, Western Australia has the advantage of lower living costs, its geographic location, (i.e. close to Asia) and it is on a similar time zone to many of the source countries. This makes it a popular choice. However, the quality of the higher education environment of the receiving institutions should be carefully monitored. Decisions of where to enrol will be influenced by the quality of the technical facilities, (i.e. are they up to date) and by staff who are well-trained and suitably qualified, and the general reputation that a degree from that university holds internationally.

In turn the perceived quality of an overseas qualification is often accompanied by a judgement about whether a qualification from the intended institution is better than a local one. In addition, “the strong lure of a ‘Western education’ is likely to be associated with a perception that studying overseas will open a career in the new free-market economy or increase the prospect of securing future migration” (Mazzarol et al., 2001, p. 51). So many students are seeking a quality degree that will enhance their employment opportunities upon their return home.

### **Quality of Offshore Programmes**

Another option that has emerged globally is that of offshore programs. These are now being offered by many Australian universities. Through such courses, international students can avail themselves of an overseas qualification whilst remaining in their home countries, often made possible by using the latest technological facilities. This would be an attractive alternative for those students who are unable to commit to moving overseas for a



fixed period of time. It would also be one way to avoid some of the problems typically associated with studying in another country, which include financial difficulties, problems managing the demands of study and experiences of racial intolerance. For international students seeking a 'western' degree, such problems could be partly circumvented by taking advantage of a range of recent agreements to deliver offshore education, or 'transnational education'. This has come about as a result of flexible delivery options, partnerships, and twinning and franchising arrangements between institutions in different countries.

Of the total number of 188,406 international students enrolled at Australian universities in Semester 2, 2004, almost 57,215 were enrolled in offshore courses (IDP Education Australia, 2004, p. 5). Some institutions, (notably Curtin University in Western Australia) have been successful in running offshore programs, for example, Curtin Sarawak campus, located in Miri. However, recent Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) reports indicated that for some institutions there were significant areas needing improvement with regard to the management of offshore relationships (AUQA, in Heffernan & Poole, 2004). The reports appear to indicate that "higher quality relationships lead directly and indirectly to higher quality academic programmes and support services", (Heffernan & Poole, 2004, p. 78). Conversely, failure within offshore partnerships was attributed partly to the length of time for which the partnerships had existed, and partly to mismatches in goals and visions, and inconsistencies in the primary objectives for the relationship; for example, "the research showed that when one partner's sole objective was profit, even if the other partner's objective was quality education and profit, the relationship, if continued after the early interaction stage, experienced numerous difficulties" (Heffernan & Poole, 2004, p. 86).

Increased use of technology in general, and the Internet in particular have provided further opportunities to offer offshore programmes. While these options have been eagerly embraced by many institutions world wide, they have also put pressure on Australian institutions to deliver quality courses in a very competitive environment. One of the major challenges to quality in this regard, is the need to maintain parity in standards, particularly in relation to teaching and assessment. This can be achieved through both mentoring in the early stages of the programmes, and through ongoing monitoring of assessed work. In other words, offshore courses must consistently be able to maintain the same high standards as their onshore counterparts.

The provision of offshore programmes certainly provides extended possibilities in relation to international students, but the success of such courses relies on the maintenance of solid relationships and consistent standards between the partner institutions. In this way, viable business opportunities should certainly be pursued, but attention should always be paid to the need to maintain standards and offer a quality product.

## **English Language Proficiency and the Quality of Applicants**

### ***Entry Requirements***

An integral part of the process of admission to any university to ensure the quality of applicants is the requirement for proof of English language proficiency. This applies to both native and non-native speakers alike. A number of proficiency tests have been designed specifically for those whose first language is not English, and who aim to study abroad. The two most popular internationally recognised tests of English are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). IELTS, the more recent of the two, has gained increasing recognition since its inception in late 1989. It is used to ascertain “English language requirements for entry to academic courses by the majority of institutions of further and higher education in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom and currently by over 400 universities and colleges in the USA” (UCLES, 2003a, p. 14).

IELTS has also experienced phenomenal growth in terms of its candidature. For example, approximately 25,000 candidates took the test in 1991, while “in 2002 more than 350,000 candidates took the test. This represented a 67% increase on the previous year and reflected the increased use and recognition of IELTS world-wide” (UCLES, 2003a, p. 4). The number of candidates taking the test increased to well over 475,000 in 2003, representing a further rise of 34% from 2002 (UCLES, 2004, p. 3). Approximately three-quarters of those candidates took the Academic modules, which are normally used for tertiary study purposes. Therefore this is an indication of the demand for degrees in English-speaking countries. There are currently 310 IELTS test centres in 113 countries around the world (UCLES, 2004, p. 10), with test administrations taking place on a regular basis according to local demand. Because of its recognition and availability, an English test such as IELTS would be the desired instrument for tertiary institutions to use as proof of English proficiency for the admission of overseas students.

Despite the widespread adoption of tests such as IELTS, robust and reliable tests of English are not always used, which may result in a lack of comparability across the range of tests/admissions criteria accepted by Australian universities. A survey undertaken among Australian tertiary institutions found that in fact 61 different types of evidence were acceptable as proof of English language proficiency, for students whose first language was other than English. The study concluded that many of these were “inadequate measures of language proficiency for academic study” (Coley, 1999, p. 7). Of particular concern is the fact that the study found that some universities were using pieces of evidence other than formal, standardized language tests, such as successful completion of courses conducted through the medium of English, in the students’ home countries. The relationship between successful completion of a content-based course, and the level of English proficiency demonstrated is tenuous and often difficult to measure. In the first place, different academic courses require different levels of linguistic competence; secondly, such measures do not offer the consistent basis for comparison provided by a standardized test. When such criteria are used to admit students, this draws into question not only the quality of the applicants, but if used on a regular basis, will ultimately affect the quality of the courses they are undertaking.

One of the strengths of the IELTS test is that it offers separate bandscores for four modules; Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking, in addition to an overall bandscore. This sets it apart from other language tests, (even the multiple-choice TOEFL, which does not always cover all four macro skills); nor is the TWE (Test of Written English) component of the TOEFL test compulsory for undergraduate/postgraduate entry to some universities. In the case of IELTS, there is no formal pass or fail score. Rather, the test partners (British Council, IDP Education Australia: IELTS Australia, and the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations) recommend minimum overall bandscores to guide admissions staff in the receiving institutions, since the actual test papers are not available in the public domain. These guidelines distinguish between ‘linguistically demanding academic courses’, such as Medicine, Law, Linguistics, Journalism and Library Studies, for which a minimum overall bandscore of 6.5 would indicate ‘English study needed’, while an overall bandscore of 7.0 would be ‘Probably acceptable’; and ‘less linguistically demanding academic courses’, such as Agriculture, Pure Mathematics, Technology, Computer-based work and Telecommunications, for which a score of 6.0 would require further English study, while a score of 6.5 would be ‘Probably acceptable’(UCLES, 2003b, p. 5). In

addition to looking at the overall bandscores, receiving institutions are advised to consider the scores for the individual modules, and match them up to the requirements of the particular courses the students are applying for. In the public universities in Western Australia, the minimum overall bandscore required for undergraduate admission is 6.5, with the exception of Curtin University, where it is 6.0. Given that this is the case, the majority of students coming into these institutions with the minimum required English score will need further English language support. Furthermore, not all universities stipulate separate entry requirements for postgraduates, nor do they request minimum scores on individual modules. Therefore, many international students who gain entry to their courses, partly on the basis that they have met the minimum English requirement, are destined to face considerable language difficulties from the outset. However, in reality, many prospective students are not aware of this, and mistakenly believe that if they meet the minimum English language entry requirements (in addition to the academic entry criteria), that successful completion of their course will be tantamount to putting in the time.

Even though a high score on IELTS does not equate with academic success; nor is the corollary necessarily the case, as has been shown by a number of predictive validity studies (for example, Bellingham, 1993; Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Elder, 1993; Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000), such studies do, however, point to the importance of cut-off points for English language scores. Further, it is generally agreed that a minimum language threshold exists, below which candidates are at risk of failure in terms of their English level; and that receiving institutions (and individual departments within those institutions) need to use the recommendations set out by the IELTS test partners, to make their own decisions regarding the appropriate cut-off points for specific courses. In many cases, this will mean demanding over and above the absolute minimum requirements (especially for the more linguistically demanding courses), not only for quality standards to be maintained, but also so that the expectations of both institutions and students can be met.

Therefore, for those students who just meet minimum English language entry requirements, there is still a long way to go, not only academically, but also in terms of developing their English language proficiency. While many international students will experience improvements in their English simply through increased exposure and interaction once they commence living and studying in an English-medium environment, this is not always the case. Although there will be an increased opportunity to mix with speakers of English, some tend to gravitate towards others from their own

cultures/language backgrounds (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 18) thus giving them minimal exposure to the language outside class. In the case of postgraduate students, the issue of improving their language skills may pose even greater problems, since a great deal of independent study is required of those doing higher degrees by research, and many such students mistakenly believe that the supervisor's role would include language support. This means that these students believe that the shortfall in their language skills will be made up by the academic staff, who in turn, believe that the students come to the course already armed with the appropriate skills. This accentuates the inevitable gap between expectations and reality, and the mismatch between the two could ultimately lead to a reduction in the quality of the degree.

Finally, students who wish to gain admission to higher education in English-medium countries should be made aware of the fact that being able to cope linguistically is contingent on a range of factors over and above the achievement of a minimum level of proficiency (which in itself comes with no guarantees). Furthermore, prospective students, and academic staff, too, need to be made cognizant that the whole process of acquiring the appropriate language skills to engage in tertiary studies requires considerable time. Unfortunately, this is not always articulated in marketing material. It also is crucial to avoid anomalous use of the nomenclature (see Coley, 1999) relating to English proficiency needs. In this way, there will be a transparent system which advises students that a quality degree demands a certain level of English proficiency to guard against the risk of failure.

### *Academic Literacy*

While the use of widely-accepted screening tests such as IELTS and TOEFL have helped institutions to make clear-cut decisions when admitting potential students, the argument has been put forward by Turner (2004) that, while the testing process itself is valid, such tests have created what she calls "the technicisation of language" (p. 97); furthermore she criticizes the way in which "the tests have infiltrated institutional discourse and what is perhaps worse, how they distort students' perception of the role of language use in academic performance"(p. 97). Indeed, students who are struggling to meet English language entry requirements using IELTS, for example, frequently focus on the achievement of a particular bandscore, rather than engaging with the language in a broader sense. This idea is supported by the fact that there is a proliferation of training courses, commercially available practice materials, and tutors on the market, to assist desperate

students in their quest to gain admission. At the heart of the matter is the fact that it takes much more than a score on a language test to engage with, and succeed in, academic tasks. Specifically gaining the desired test result should be viewed as just the starting point, both for native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) alike, in their journey towards academic success. It is becoming increasingly apparent that in the case of NNS students, the process of ongoing language support must be built in to their further education if they are to graduate with a quality degree. How this might be achieved is clearly up to the host institutions, but if they are to be successful in the long term in this global education market, structural changes may need to be put in place to make this possible.

Success in tertiary study is also dependent upon a student's "academic literacy". This has been narrowly defined by Spack (1997) in Braine, (2002, p. 60) as "the ability to read and write the various texts assigned in [university]" in the context of undergraduates. However, for (post)graduates, it is much more than this. According to Braine (2002), himself a former NNS graduate student, "Simply stated, a knowledge of one's chosen field of study, research skills, and good reading and writing skills form only the foundation for the acquisition of academic literacy" (p. 60). What is also needed is for students to engage with the language as an integral part of the subject, because good language use contributes to good quality output and ultimately to academic success.

Similarly Turner (in Jones, Turner, and Street, 1999) sees academic literacy as an increasingly important area of pedagogic practice. "Both political demands to widen the intake of students into higher education and financial demands to increase the numbers of overseas students, most of whom have very different educational cultural and linguistic backgrounds, are shaping that practice" (p. 149). What international students are not usually aware of is that certain academic skills such as referencing and critical thinking are simply expected in western universities. For many of those students, this represents entirely new ground, and requires fundamental shifts in the way they approach their learning experience. An appreciation of the differences in these contrasting pedagogical traditions on the part of both students and faculty could help to highlight and reinforce the key features of what constitutes quality academic literacy.

Further, while students do need to master all four macro-skills in English, the fact remains that most of their assessable work revolves around writing. In a paper entitled

‘The Student from Overseas and the British University’, Jones (in Jones, Turner and Street, 1999) commented that:

The hallmark of success for any students at university is mastery of academic writing. Students are constantly required to write essays, for which they receive assessment marks. These make up their profile and thus are the main indicators of their eventual success. Yet the writing process is a much-neglected area because too little recognition is given to the fact that it is a highly complex process. It is often perceived as an isolated exercise whereas, in reality it is entirely integrated with all aspects of a student’s academic life. (p. 38)

Even so, success for international students in tertiary study requires much more than developing the ability to write well in English. This argument is presented succinctly in the summary of the research on academic literacy for graduate students by Braine (2002), who found that:

To sum up, the research reveals that writing plays a vital role in graduate studies, ....Further, in order to succeed in graduate studies, students not only need a high proficiency in English and the ability to use appropriate learning strategies, but also sound social skills. (p. 65)

A quality qualification is achieved when students fully meet the set requirements and educational objectives. Thus, the overall quality of a degree is maintained when standards are in no way compromised. In order to succeed in their studies, potential students must possess the fundamental skills necessary to demonstrate quality in their work. To enable this to happen many institutions now provide pathway courses to enable overseas students to further develop their English language skills in preparation for mainstream studies. There is a range of such English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses available (for example, Bridging and Foundation programs) and students may be required to take one or more of these courses, depending on their previous academic record. Although the need to undertake these courses is usually characterized by the students having failed to achieve the appropriate English language levels for tertiary study, in fact, EAP courses, such as the English Language Bridging Course at Curtin University also provide a range of language-related academic skills, which prepare students for their future studies. However, many overseas students see these courses as time-consuming and costly, delaying the commencement of their intended mainstream courses. In reality, for the most part, those students who have undertaken the ELBC report benefits beyond the technical aspects of the

language, and feel much better equipped to cope with at least some of the language demands of their studies. (Samples of such students' comments are reported in later papers of this portfolio).

While it is perfectly understandable that budget considerations will always be prominent, there tends to be a prevailing attitude, particularly among overseas students, that time is money, and that by reducing time, costs can be reduced. Turner (2004) captures these beliefs in the following statement:

Time is money, but time is also intellectual investment. The continuing short-cut mentality underestimates the time it takes to really get to grips with the language, and undervalues the role of language in academic performance. Students seem not to want to spend time, effort, and money on getting to grips with the language, but to proceed as quickly as possible to the 'real' thing. (p. 97)

The irony of this situation is that so many of our international students have invested time and money to travel overseas to obtain a quality degree from a reputable institution, because such a qualification would be superior to what they can get in their own country. However, they fail to realize that in taking a degree through the medium of another language, they must first be literate in that language in order to meet the demands of a quality course. This cannot be achieved quickly, and the investment of time is paramount in language acquisition. Unfortunately, many of these students do not fully comprehend the enormity of the task, often becoming impatient and frustrated when their English does not improve as quickly as they would expect.

The belief that spending time and/or money improving their English is time and money wasted seems to dominate even after students have commenced their mainstream studies. There is no doubt that in most Australian institutions ongoing English support is available, but from the students' point of view, it is seen as an additional burden on their already heavy workload, and because many English support units do not bear credit points, they detract from the time available to study the 'real' thing. Thus it would seem that if universities are serious about maintaining quality, particularly with regard to the issue of English language proficiency, then they should be prepared to formally build in English language support units where needed, given that in many cases they have admitted students using a formal test score which indicates that further English study is recommended. For many institutions, not only is this not acknowledged, but in some cases, alternative routes have been developed. Unfortunately for the students, many mistakenly believe that they



can get by without the extra language help they require, thus running the risk of dropping standards in terms of the quality of their work. Furthermore, this situation is exacerbated by the fact that faculty members are not usually aware of what language proficiency measures were used to admit the students, nor what levels they actually achieved on entry; and those outside the language areas often lack the resources to recommend the appropriate language support, when it is needed. As a result it is generally left up to the students themselves to seek help, and they may not in fact be fully aware of their needs and the consequences if these needs are not satisfied. Hence the cyclic nature of this problem – differing expectations, lack of awareness about language requirements, poor English proficiency, optional English language support, which in turn all contribute to the quality of the students' work and the degree structure itself being placed in jeopardy.

One recommendation that could counter this situation is for institutions such as Curtin where minimum cut-off points for English language proficiency are relatively low, is to offset this with compulsory English language support where appropriate. In other words, there is a need to not only assess students' language proficiency at the commencement of any course, but to follow up and support the progress of those students throughout their studies so that quality of the degree they obtain, and the reputation of the institution are maintained.

### **Internationalising the Curriculum**

One of the most positive outcomes of extending the higher education market globally has been an increasing emphasis among Australian universities on 'internationalising the curriculum'. The process of internationalisation is embedded in the strategic plans and mission statements of most Australian universities, and several (for example, Curtin University, University of South Australia and RMIT) have implemented forward-thinking initiatives in this regard. These have been prompted by OECD guidelines (IDP Education Australia, 1995), which outline nine different types of internationalised curricula, including areas such as preparing graduates for international professions, interdisciplinary programs drawn from more than one country, training in intercultural skills, and content that is especially designed for foreign students.

In addition to the above broad aims, it has been suggested that the nature of evaluation and assessment be regularly reviewed to suit the diversity of the student body. However, concern has been expressed that in many cases, so-called internationalized

curricula are actually culturally embedded. An example of such is reported by Jones (1999, p. 40) in the case of British universities. Similar concerns are expressed by Liddicoat (2003, p. 17) in the Australian context; “As an educational approach, internationalized education requires more than a diverse body of students, assembled primarily as an economic imperative. It also requires that the practices of the universities themselves be modified and adapted.” Marginson (2002, p.42) also raises concern that the “deeper pedagogical consequences of a large international student population have yet to be faced on most campuses”. He adds that “some faculty believe the classroom must be a level playing field in which no student received distinct treatment or extra resources. Others who hold that teaching must respond to the particular needs of each individual often lack the resources to do this” (p. 42). In turn this brings us back to the question of quality – not just in the immediate term, but in the long term, so that standards can be maintained. Marginson’s comments concur with this, and indicate why there is a need for governments to reinvest the valuable import dollar appropriately:

In the longer term, Australia will need to diversify its source countries, broaden the engagement of the disciplines it offers (particularly in the sciences), and underpin foreign-students education with global mutuality and greater linguistic and cultural depth. It also needs to arrest the downward pressures on quality, for which task government reinvestment is essential. Australia’s capacity to sustain a leading role in global education will depend on the achievement of a more sophisticated and productive balance between its commercial and educational objectives. (2002, p. 43)

Therefore, while at the policy level, the process of internationalization is well-intentioned, in practice many Australian universities fall short in meeting the ultimate goal of preparing students to function in the globalised world. In the words of Liddicoat, (2003, p. 18) “policy documents, both from governments and universities, tend to assert internationalization without defining it and internationalisation tends to be seen as an outcome rather than as an educative process”.

### **Conclusion**

Projections for the 21<sup>st</sup> century indicate that there will be an increase in demand for places (whether offshore or onshore) in Australian institutions from many international students (and from India and China in particular). As Mazzarol and Soutar (2001) predict:

...the future is likely to see a much more competitive environment, with increasing sophistication, among both the student consumers and the institutional marketers.

Delivery methods will change as a result of new education technologies that will permit students to study at a foreign institution through the Internet or at a local branch campus without travelling overseas. (pp. 30-31)

To meet this demand, Australian university courses are being marketed to an increasingly diverse clientele. This presents tertiary institutions with a real challenge: on the one hand to maintain their quality and on the other to accommodate the needs of students. Thus the threat to quality courses may be seen to come from three directions; the pressure to generate income from overseas students, the need to respond to market demands by providing diversity and flexibility in their courses, and the pressure to admit students whose English language skills need ongoing development.

The value of the education import dollar for Australian universities is not to be underestimated. Indeed, as we have already seen, the increase in demand for university places among overseas students brings with it increased income for those Australian universities. However, once that demand has been created, it needs to be upheld; this means that the valuable income generated by full-fee paying students (most of whom are international) needs to be managed efficiently and re-invested to provide quality services for those students to use. For example, technical facilities need to be up-to-date, teaching staff need to be suitably qualified and trained, and adequate support services need to be available on campus. Therefore those valuable funds need to be used to maintain quality in many aspects.

International students provide much-needed revenue for Australian universities, but expect quality in return. This could mean flexibility in the mode and delivery of courses offered. One example of this is the provision of offshore courses, now becoming an attractive option for increasing numbers of students. This requires above all the need for good relationships between the institutions involved, with close attention to the need for consistently high standards between offshore and home campuses in both delivery and assessment. Finally, to meet the challenges of globalization, Australian universities need to adapt their teaching and assessment practices to better suit the changing nature of the wider world in which graduates will operate. However, such change and adaptation must not come at the cost of quality.

The final and possibly the most contentious possible threat to maintaining quality is the issue of the importance of English language proficiency for successful study. It is clear that the true extent of what is involved in mastering the English skills needed to complete a

degree in Australia is rarely communicated to potential students. One of the most challenging aspects to this is ensuring that international students know what to expect within the broader scope of academic literacy. If, for example, additional English language support will be deemed necessary and, in fact, is an integral part of completing the degree, then such information must form part of the marketing package. Similarly structural aspects related to this should be put in place within the program (such as developing English proficiency courses to be undertaken for credit). Clearly, if institutions are willing to take in students who, through the admission testing process are deemed to need ongoing language support, then the onus is on the institutions to offer that support. If this does not happen, the quality of the qualifications will suffer, as will the reputation of the institutions that provide these courses. The long-term consequences of this will be a drop in demand and therefore a reduction in the commercial benefits of internationalization.

Overseas students and their families place great value on degrees obtained from Australian universities and as a consequence often make great sacrifices to come to Australia. In this competitive environment, their contribution is much needed. Therefore, there is a need to match the expectations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001, p. 168), of the students themselves and those of the host institutions. This is another challenge that presents itself to tertiary educators. One way to address these challenges is to ensure that the expectations of intending students are realistic in the first place. Therefore, universities need to be transparent about exactly what they have to offer, and, more importantly, what is required for the successful completion of a quality degree. In this way, there is less likelihood that what Marginson (2002) termed the possible 'downward pressures on quality' will occur. This is crucial in an environment where quality is seen as the driver of international education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## **LINKING COMMENTARY: PAPER 1 TO PAPER 2**

From Paper 1 it is clear that, especially in the past, Australian universities have gained a good reputation as a destination for university study, especially among international students from South-East Asia. However, it is also apparent that maintaining quality is an important aim if that reputation is to continue. It is therefore essential that not only are quality degrees offered, but the quality of the students recruited must not be in question, nor must their potential to reach the standards required of them. Central to this potential is the ability to demonstrate a complex range of English language skills. International students are required to contextualise the place of English language proficiency within the network of language-related skills they need for success in an English-medium university. Before this can be done, however, it is essential that there is a robust test of English to allow students to be fairly judged for admission to university. Standardised tests such as IELTS, constructed by experts in the area, provide a level playing field whereby results can be compared across a wide range of language levels and backgrounds. In other words, the results form a common international language, upon which decisions can be based. In addition, international tests such as IELTS provide convenience for candidates: students can take the test almost anywhere in the world, which means that they do not have to wait to enter the host country to take the test, and the results can be produced within two weeks.

As with all tests, issues of validity and reliability are paramount. In the case of high stakes tests where large numbers of students are applying to take the test, there is another issue to be considered – that of practicality. With over eight years' experience as the administrator of a large IELTS testing centre, I am keenly aware of the practical issues related to the administration of the test. It is apparent that there is a need to develop not just a convenient way to do this, but also expedient testing procedures. I was therefore interested in the outcome of the changeover of the TOEFL test from pen-and-paper format, to a computer-based format in 1998, given that the Computer Based IELTS (an optional computer-based form of IELTS) has been at the trialling stage for several years, but to date is only available at a limited number of centres.



The next paper looks at a number of studies which investigated the impact of computer-adaptive tests (CATS). These studies are mostly based around the TOEFL test. The important issue of construct validity is raised; for example, there is an inherent difference between having to scroll up or down a (screen) page to read a text, and then answer questions on another page, and having both text and questions available on one spread, as with the pen-and-paper version. It is therefore important that computer-based tests do not reduce the validity of the language testing process. In large-scale tests, CATS serve to provide efficient administration and marking, but only where the technology is available and functioning correctly. However, it is important to resist the temptation to address the practicality issues at the expense of validity. For example, currently there is a limit to which language skills can be tested by a computer.

The other important issue raised here is that of access and equity. Although the use of and familiarity with computers is spreading globally, it is still the case that international students from certain source countries (for example, several of the African nations and some countries within South-East Asia) have had minimal exposure to this technology. Therefore they would be at a disadvantage if required to take a computer-based test. This could have serious implications for the whole testing process.

On the eve of the introduction of the next generation TOEFL test and the computer-based option of IELTS, in the next paper the advantages and disadvantages of computer-based language tests are presented, together with some suggestions for future research.

## PAPER 2

### LANGUAGE TESTING AND TECHNOLOGY

Testing has been described as “a universal feature of social life” (McNamara, 2000, p. 3). All tests are important because they provide information about the test-takers, which may be used for a range of purposes. Because of the important uses of test results, there is a certain element of power associated with those who design and administer tests, contrasted with the powerlessness and anxiety of test takers. Because of this tremendous potential capacity, it is important for test designers to produce fair and accurate tests.

“As one type of measurement, a test necessarily quantifies characteristics of individuals according to explicit procedures. What distinguishes a test from other types of measurement is that it is designed to obtain a specific sample of behaviour” (Bachman, 1990, pp. 21-22). When looking at the role of testing in any situation, the primary question to ask is ‘for what purpose is the test being used?’ The use of language tests has always been important because the results obtained serve to enhance and promote the learning process. In the case of English language tests in particular, there is increasing pressure to achieve desired results, because such success provides gateways of opportunity for ever-growing numbers of learners.

For millions around the world, English language competence is the key to information, educational opportunity and employment. In ESL testing our purpose should be to help people realize their educational and career goals, while assisting institutions in making the resource allocation decisions they must. (Braun, 2000, p.271)

In the case of overseas students wishing to study in an English-medium university, a range of tests is used to assess their language proficiency, so that decisions can be made about their future study. These decisions may relate to placing students in the correct class, or providing them with information about the linguistic improvement they have made during a language course – such tests are commonly referred to as ‘low stakes tests’. On the other hand, decisions made on the basis of the results of an English language proficiency test can have much further-reaching effects, such as admission to a degree course. These tests are referred to as ‘high stakes tests’. Two examples of such high stakes

tests are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Both have been widely used for a number of years to screen for English language proficiency; the former was established primarily for students applying to North American universities, while the latter was established in 1989 as a joint venture by a British/Australian team, to replace its predecessor, the ELTS test. IELTS operates in over 300 test centres in 113 countries, (UCLES, 2004, p. 10) and is used for admission to English-medium universities all over the world.

As developments in information and communications technology progress rapidly, computers are playing an increasing role in language teaching and testing. With an increasing demand world wide to learn English, it is not surprising then, that language test developers are taking advantage of the available technology to capture, store, process and retrieve the enormous amount of information needed to efficiently run a range of different language tests. Therefore technology is being incorporated into many types of language tests because of the flexibility and efficiency it offers.

Language test developers must always be mindful of how they design and use tests. However, incorporating the additional dimension of technology offers special challenges in this regard because of the possible paradigm shift in our approach to language testing, prompted by technological change (Jones, 2003, p. 3). This paper will look at the role of technology in language testing and will attempt to answer the following questions:

- In what ways can computerised tests improve traditional test methods?
- To what extent are the abilities tested on computer-based tests comparable to their pen-and-paper counterparts?
- To what extent are the scores obtained comparable?
- What might be sacrificed along the way?

Reference will be made to a selection of specific studies, which highlight the need for special considerations to be taken into account when moving towards computer-based testing (CBT).

### **Language Test Characteristics**

Whatever the purpose or method of any given test, there are two essential qualities required – it must be valid and it must be reliable. Validity refers to the degree to which the

test is measuring what it is supposed to measure, and reliability refers to the degree of consistency in results that a test-taker would be expected to achieve, over multiple takings of the same test. It is obvious then, that the more important the consequences of the test are, the more important it is to ensure validity and reliability. This is crucial in the case of high stakes tests, where serious decisions are being made on the basis of results obtained. In addition to the two qualities mentioned above, a test must be practical; practicality refers to a range of basic issues, including having the infrastructure and resources available to administer the test efficiently and economically.

Technology is increasingly being promoted as a powerful force which is rapidly changing the face of education, and since language testing is an integral part of language learning, it is not surprising that language testing research is turning more and more towards computer-based testing (CBT). Although this concept has been around since the mid-1980s, it is only relatively recently that computer-based testing has been adopted by the governing bodies of the larger scale tests. For example, in 1998 the Educational Testing Service (ETS) introduced the computer-based TOEFL to enhance assessments by using electronic technology to test more complex skills (ETS, 2003, p. 3).

Tests that are administered via a computer terminal are known as 'Computer Assisted Tests' (CATs). These are relatively easy to run, and involve receptive-response items, including multiple-choice items or true/false items. They are therefore easy to adapt to the computer medium. A specific type of computer assisted language test is the Computer-Adaptive Language Test (CALT). The CALT was developed using a general measurement theory known as Item Response Theory (IRT). IRT is based on a probabilistic theory, that is, it calculates the probability of a person getting a particular item right (Alderson, Clapham & Wall, 1995). Extensive theoretical research was carried out on CAT and IRT in the 1960s and 1970s by the U.S. Department of Defence, which recognised the potential benefits of adaptive testing (Dunkel, 1999). In CATs, the candidate's ability is monitored as s/he goes through the test, and suitable items are selected which most match his/her ability. The items are stored in an 'item bank' and the computer selects appropriate items as the test proceeds. Once the candidate reaches a particular level (which is determined according to a specified standard error of measurement), the test is automatically terminated. The system is efficient in that it provides an instant result, using the minimum of items necessary, and in a shorter space of time than with its pen-and-paper

counterpart. Its precision lies in the degree of accuracy with which the candidates' level can be estimated. The advantages of this system are obvious – the flexibility of administration, the shorter period of time needed to take the test, the lack of incentive to cheat, the availability of diagnostic information to both teachers and students, and finally, a more efficient use of test bank items (because of the fact that exposure is limited to only those items necessary to determine a particular candidate's level).

By the 1980s, CATs were being used by many language institutes and at universities in many parts of the world, and modern developments in technology and computer software have made computer-adaptive testing become a viable alternative to conventional pen-and-paper testing.

The computer-adaptive language test (CALT) is uniquely tailored to each individual. In addition, CALT is automatically terminated when the examinee's ability level has been determined ... The result is a test that is more precise yet generally much shorter than conventional paper-and-pencil tests. (Madsen, 1991, p. 237)

Technology promises speed, accuracy and efficiency – in the case of language testing, technology is being used partly because it is available, and partly because it is intended to offer improvements in the way the job has been done traditionally. However, while there is little doubt that computer-based testing has in many ways rendered the language testing process more practical, the move to embrace technology needs to be done whilst at the same time conserving the underlying basic qualities of validity and reliability in language testing.

There is some concern that the validity of computerised language tests may be compromised, as the second language (L2) field has long promoted performance-based assessment, a form of assessment that does not lend itself as easily to computer administration as do more traditional test formats (Chalhoub-Deville, 2001). Thus it is important to ensure that the test design continues to incorporate the same generic principles underpinning test construction, notwithstanding the extent to which technology is used. However, the increasing use of technology in language tests has raised a number of issues worthy of consideration, including construct validity, computer familiarity, practicality and equity.

## **Language Testing and Technology – the Implications**

In this section, a number of issues related to using technology in language testing will be identified and discussed. For each one, a definition will be provided, together with an explanation of its application in the context of ICT. Finally, reference will be made to the findings of a number of relevant research studies, which report the positive and negative outcomes of computerised testing, and highlight the specific challenges involved for test users.

### ***Construct Validity – Computers Versus Pen and Paper***

Firstly, of primary concern to computer-based tests is the issue of construct validity, and in particular the extent to which construct validity is maintained with a computerised test. Construct validity is defined thus: “A test, part of a test, or a testing technique is said to have construct validity if it can be demonstrated that it measures just the ability which it is supposed to measure” (Hughes, 1989, p. 26). In the case of computer-based language testing, it is important that the test is measuring the pertinent language skill or ability of the test-taker, rather than his/her computer skills. In particular, the mode of presentation should not have an effect on the test-taker’s results; for example, reading from a computer screen is different to reading from a double-page spread in print, and requires different cognitive skills. Similarly, there is a fundamental difference between handwriting and word-processing. Therefore, the equivalence of corresponding conventional and computerised test forms must be established. The important question here is: can the same skills be equally and fairly measured by computer tests, as by their pen-and-paper counterparts?

In the context of large-scale high-stakes tests which are currently moving towards becoming computer-based, this is a key issue. A prime example of this is TOEFL. The TOEFL test has been in use for many years as a standardised test of English proficiency. It was developed and is administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the USA. It is most commonly used by non-native speakers of English who wish to study at North American universities, but is recognised and administered world-wide. It is a standardised norm-referenced test, consisting of three sections; listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension, with a Test of Written English (TWE) as an option, made obligatory by some administrations.

Major changes were undertaken in the implementation of TOEFL in the late 1990s. The most significant was the changeover from the traditional pen and paper test, to a wholly computer-based format, where the reading and structure sections are computer-adaptive. The test designers needed to ensure, therefore that test takers would not be disadvantaged by lack of computer familiarity.

As part of this change, a major quantitative study was undertaken by Taylor, Kirsch, Eignor and Jamieson (1999) to look at the relationship between computer familiarity and performance on the computer-based test. The prime reason for this was to eliminate any possibility that language proficiency would be confounded with computer proficiency, as this would undermine the construct validity of the test. The subjects were all TOEFL test takers from 12 international sites. A group of 1,200 examinees was categorized as 'low computer-familiar' and 'high computer-familiar'. They then worked through a computer tutorial and a set of 60 computerised test items. For purposes of ensuring that TOEFL test takers were sufficiently familiar with computers to take the test, the test developers, (ETS) designed a tutorial to be taken by all test takers. The authors concluded that "no evidence exists of an adverse relationship between computer familiarity and computer-based TOEFL test performance due to lack of prior computer experience" (Taylor et al., pp. 219-220). However, they did raise concerns about future generations of computer-based tests; "For example, at present, little is known about the effects of various multimedia applications or how what is being measured actually changes when presented in a CBT environment rather than a paper-and-pencil environment" (p. 270). Finally they recommended further research into the area of whether what is being measured actually changes when presented in a CBT environment, as test items and the level of manipulation become more sophisticated over time.

In a review of the literature addressing the comparability of pen and paper tests and computerised tests of reading, and to identify pertinent areas for future research, Yasuyo Sawaki (2001) raised some important issues regarding the mode of presentation in language assessment. While one section of the review focused on L1 (first language) reading research, rather than L2 (second language), the author started out with the same basic premise; that reading from a computer screen is becoming more commonplace in our daily lives, and raised the question of whether reading from a computer screen is the same as reading in print, specifically in the case of L2 readers. Sawaki believed that the current

push towards computerised testing is moving ahead without sufficient empirical evidence in this area, and raised concern over whether the same construct is being measured in the computerised and equivalent pen and paper tests. The author therefore looked at:

(a) studies that address general construct validity issues of computerized tests in cognitive ability as well as language assessment: and (b) studies that shed light on the effect of mode of presentation on reading performance conducted mainly in ergonomics, education, psychology, and L1 reading research. (2001, p. 38)

In a fairly extensive review of the literature relating to (a) above, the author selected critical areas for comparison between computerised and pen and paper tests. These included content, psychometric equivalence, the impact of computerisation on examinees and finally the decisions to be made about examinees on the basis of results. She also took care to check that the criteria for assessing the equivalence of test forms across modes were sufficiently standardized and within the guidelines set out by the American Psychological Association (1986). However, the author found that the assessment literature in this area indicates that “the empirical findings as to comparability of conventional and computerized tests are rather mixed” (Sawaki, 2001, p. 6). While she found that there were some differences, they did not seem to be of any great consequence in terms of the decisions being made.

In relation to the studies reported in (b) above, the conclusions were once again mixed. While it was found that comprehension of computer-presented texts is generally as good as that of printed texts, it also seemed that reading speed may or may not be affected by mode of presentation. Despite the mixed findings reported in the review, the author clearly identified some crucial areas worthy of further investigation in her discussion. These include the notion of addressing the effect of mode of presentation on the process rather than the product of reading, and to this end, suggested methodologies such as analysis of eye movement and verbal protocol analysis.

Sawaki also highlighted the dearth of interpretive research, for example post-hoc interviews and questionnaires in the studies reviewed. She also identified two important limitations in the in the scope of the literature. These are; firstly the fact that the literature did not investigate issues that are more important to longer texts, which would be used in more advanced L2 reading tests (most of the studies reviewed involved shorter texts or proof-reading); secondly, Sawaki pointed out that the study did not cover empirical studies on reading passages that were accompanied by visual prompts, such as figures or graphics.



She commented that “if such visual prompts are incorporated into a computerized test, effects of these visuals on examinees’ cognitive processing and the potential effects of performance differences across modes should also be addressed” (2001, p. 13).

Sawaki concluded that the effects of mode of presentation on test performance are indeed complex, and that the literature suggests that these effects:

may be observed in a change in the nature of a test task, in a decision based on a test score, in test completion time, and in test takers’ affect, for example, whereas the test score itself may not necessarily be influenced...further investigation in this area should be an integral part of future construct validation in computerized tests of reading in a second/foreign language. (2001, p. 13)

These conclusions have important implications for those who use computerised language tests. Firstly, even where the final score may not be affected, test-takers may be employing different strategies and skills in order to reach the same end. Therefore the skills that are being demonstrated must match the skills that are being thus tested in order for the test to maintain validity. Secondly, the management of time plays a crucial role in language testing, particularly in high stakes tests; therefore comparative studies of time taken to complete computerised versus pen-and-paper based tests would help to ensure parity between the two formats.

### ***Computer Familiarity – the Broader Issues***

The study undertaken by Taylor et al. (1999), as reported earlier, highlighted the need to be computer familiar, in the narrow sense, in relation to computer-based tests. However, the broader interpretation of computer familiarity, involving issues of attitudes towards computer use, levels of anxiety which could be associated with computer use, and issues of access and equity was also identified as needing further research.

One important issue for language test designers planning to use computers in testing is that of attitudes in general to computer use. Anxiety in testing situations can be compounded by (perceived) lack of expertise when technology is being used. As part of the preparation for the computer-based TOEFL, a study was undertaken by Jamieson, Taylor, Kirsch and Eignor (1998), which involved the construction of a set of tutorials designed to prepare examinees, regardless of computer familiarity, to take the computerised version of TOEFL, which was scheduled to go ‘live’ in July 1998. These tutorials were trialled as part of the computer familiarity study reported earlier.

Information gathered from 1,169 of the examinees who participated in that study, was categorised and analysed according to timing, performance data and self-reported attitudes. Analyses took into account both English language ability and computer familiarity. In all cases, even with those who were computer-familiar, the tutorial took longer than anticipated to complete. In terms of performance, over 95% of the examinees completed the exercise successfully; little or no remediation was needed by either group, (i.e. computer familiar or computer unfamiliar) and remediation, when used, was 100% successful. However, the third of these areas was the most interesting. Attitude towards ease of use of computers was compared with information taken from questionnaires which had been administered previously, and it was found that there was a positive shift in this respect. In other words, examinees appeared to become more comfortable with using the computerized TOEFL test. However, a large proportion of the overall examinee population still reported some unease. Furthermore, English ability did not seem to have a major effect on the change of comfort level. Although it is not clear whether the respondents were anxious about taking the test itself, or taking a computer-based version, or about using computers per se, this area is worthy of further investigation, given that TOEFL is such a high-stakes test. There is little doubt that anxiety can play a significant part in test performance, particularly anxiety related to the need to manipulate new technology. This was also noted by Madsen, who reported the results of an affect questionnaire administered at Brigham Young University in conjunction with a computer-adaptive test of listening and reading:

The affect questionnaire revealed differences in terms of language background. Although almost half of the Japanese had had some experience with computers, compared with less than 25% of the Spanish speakers, a Chi-square analysis disclosed that these more 'computer-experienced' Japanese were significantly more nervous prior to the CALT test than were the Spanish speakers. In short, experience with computer was not found to alleviate test anxiety. (Madsen, 1991, p. 251)

Although it is generally agreed that issues of computer familiarity are becoming less important now than in the past (Sawaki, 2001; Taylor, Jamieson & Eignor, 2000), what has emerged is that, in general, access to computers is not equally divided among different nationality groups. This means that while access to computers worldwide is increasing, this trend is not as rapid in certain parts of the world. Furthermore, certain language groups seem to be less familiar with computers than others. For example, in their computer

familiarity study, Taylor et al. reported that “among the native language groups, mean familiarity scores ranged from a low of 27.6 for Japanese test takers to a high of 35.4 for examinees who reported their native language was Spanish” (pp. 239-240). Average computer familiarity also varied across native region; for example, “from a low of 27.7 for examinees from Africa to a high of 35.5 for those from Latin America” (p.240). This highlights the widening gap between the computer ‘haves and have nots’. Therefore care must be taken not to expose some groups of students to a potential bias against those who are not yet fully comfortable with computer technology.

Such a bias (based on computer familiarity) could have serious implications for the future validity of TOEFL, given that it was mounted solely on computer in 1998<sup>2</sup>, with no option for candidates to choose the traditional pen-and-paper version. It also raises questions of equity, in an environment where increasing numbers of African students, for example, are taking up the opportunity to study abroad, and often need to take or repeat the TOEFL test in the host country. Although the researchers reported these issues as limitations, lack of computer familiarity was predicted to diminish over time.

With more and more non-native English speaking students wishing to study overseas, Taylor, Jamieson and Eignor (2000) decided to investigate the issue of whether the increasing use of computers in higher education as well as in language instruction, could cause problems for those students who did not have a background of computer use:

The increasing use of computers in North American higher education as well as in language instruction and assessment raises concerns about access and equity for many international students, who may be caught on the wrong side of the digital divide. (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 575)

The researchers were interested in the level of computer familiarity among those students who were taking the TOEFL test (for admission to North American universities) as a representative sample of English language learners around the world. They were also interested in finding out whether or not the profile was changing. An extensive literature review revealed which countries could be classified as the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in this respect, and much of the literature focussed on the use of computers in schools. However, this did not address the area of particular interest – the extent to which English language students had access to and actual use of computers on a regular basis. While local

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<sup>2</sup> The pen-and-paper version is still made available, but only in a limited number of centres where access to computers is restricted.

students were deemed to be familiar with computers and to use the Internet regularly, concern was raised about the incoming overseas student population. A range of questions had to be addressed, including:

Are all international students equally familiar with computers? Do these students know how to use an English word-processing application? Do all of these students arrive on campus already knowing how to use the Internet? In addition to English proficiency, international students will increasingly need computer skills to be ready for college. Are such expectations realistic for all matriculating international students? (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 577)

A total of 191,493 examinees participated in the study (97,364 were males, 90,059 females); the majority were between 20 and 30 years old. The survey instrument was the one developed as part of the computer familiarity study reported earlier (see Taylor, Kirsch & Eignor, 1999). The survey itself had 23 questions on four areas commonly identified in the literature, but in this instance, the researchers focused on only three questions: 1) How often do you use a computer? 2) How often do you use word processing in English? 3) How often do you use the Internet? Examinees responded to the questions on a frequency scale ranging from *never* to *once a week or more often*. The survey instrument was administered twice to all TOEFL examinees, in April/May 1996, and again about 20 months later in 1997. Then it was returned to the ETS for analysis. Responses were compared across test centre region, and by native language (a substantial proportion of the test-takers came from Asia, representing seven major language groups). In the analysis, the data were represented as percentage points, "because the large number of participants would lead to statistically significant findings that might not be meaningful in a practical sense" (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 579).

It was found that computer use was highest among the TOEFL examinees in Latin America, where in 1997, 88.4% of participants responded that they used computers at least once a week, and only 1.5% reported never having used a computer. However, the picture was very different for examinees in Africa, where in 1997, only 44.1% reportedly used computers once a week, and 24.5% reported never having used a computer.

In each of the three areas of interest, (namely, frequency of computer use, frequency of use of word processors, and frequency of use of the Internet), increases in usage were noted in the 20-month interval, especially in the use of the Internet:

For the entire group, those who responded *never* decreased from 53.1% in spring 1996 to 24.6% in fall 1997, representing a change of 28.5 percentage points. At the other end of the scale, those in the entire group who responded *once a week or more often* increased 23.5 percentage points. (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 581)

This was good news for those developing computer-based language teaching and testing materials. However the authors were frank about the limitations of the study. Firstly, it was designed to be descriptive and to show general trends, therefore the data should be interpreted broadly. In particular, the results should not be considered indicative of a high level of computer familiarity among TOEFL test-takers, because access to technology is not evenly distributed across sub-groups. For example, while a marked increase appeared overall in computer use over the 20-month interval between the two survey administrations, the use and increase were considerably less for African students. The researchers concluded that “one quarter to one half of the students from most regions of the world will likely need help learning how to use English word-processing programs and the Internet once they arrive at North American colleges and universities” (Taylor et al., p. 584). Although they acknowledged that the data provided by the survey were already dated, they recommended that teachers in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) programs should continue to “assess, rather than assume, the computer familiarity of their students” (p. 584).

For institutions wishing to accept international students, there are two issues at stake here; firstly, where computers are being used for assessment purposes, all students must be on an equal footing with regard to the ease with which they can use computers, therefore they need to be comfortable with the medium. Secondly, it must be established that such students are in an environment where they are using computers on an ongoing basis, either for reference purposes or for completing assignment work. In order to do this, universities may need to not only provide ongoing support in this regard, but also to monitor its use, so that international students are not disadvantaged because of lack of previous experience.

### ***Adapting Technology for Testing Productive and Receptive Skills***

In terms of adapting traditional tests to a computerised format, the receptive skills of reading and listening skills lend themselves particularly well to this medium, mainly because they can be objectively scored. This is achieved largely through the use of Item Response Theory (IRT), the theoretical base underpinning Computer-Adaptive Language Tests, as noted previously. This has the advantage of the efficiency and speed of storing

and retrieving items. However one negative feature of computer-adaptive tests is that users cannot change their minds about an appropriate response once they have made their selection and moved on. This could reduce the validity of measurement. It is interesting to note here that neither the next generation TOEFL (iBT) nor CB IELTS is computer-adaptive; both are linear. The reasons for this are not clear, but what does seem evident is the fact that test-takers would employ different skills in the two media to arrive at their final response.

In addition to multiple-choice items, computers have been shown to adapt well to open-ended responses, and without reliability being compromised. Jamieson, Campbell, Norfleet and Berbisada (1993) published the results of a very interesting and informative study in which the reliability of both human and computer scores of student responses to open-ended tasks was examined. The purpose of the study was to “illustrate that open-ended responses in a real-life situation for language students – taking notes and remembering what they have read – can be quickly and reliably scored by a computer” (Jamieson et al., p. 306). Undertaken in 1990, it was a well-positioned contrast to the traditional trend for computer-assisted language learning and testing to favour multiple-choice questions, where there is no need for human raters. The study had implications for both teaching and testing and would be considered particularly useful in providing diagnostic information, as well as feedback to the students. Jamieson et al. argued that “language professionals are interested in connecting what happens in teaching and testing to what the language learner is going to deal with in real life” (Jamieson et al., p. 306). In other words, the students should be able to formulate the appropriate language themselves, rather than selecting from possible answers provided. The researchers also found that the same principles for assessment of students’ notes and responses could be applied to listening comprehension. The study found that the computer program scored as reliably as humans, and in much less time.

While computer-assisted tests which rely on item banks are particularly suitable for the receptive macro-skills of listening and reading, the productive macroskills of speaking and writing do not lend themselves so well to this type of test. However, research has shown that there is excellent predictive power in a combination of CALT and non-CALT measures (Reckase, 1983). One of the best examples of a good, pedagogically sound computer-based diagnostic testing project is DIALANG, as described in Alderson (2000).

Funded by the European Union, DIALANG provides diagnostic assessment in 14 languages, and was developed in response to a growing need for self-assessment, together with a proliferation of distance learning programs requiring information on language proficiency. Its strengths relate to the provision of instant detailed feedback on test-takers' performance in relation to self-assessment, with a range of options, for example, controlling the rate of feedback and using the help, clue or dictionary facility. This, argues Alderson, is "not only more user-friendly, but also more compatible with language pedagogy" (2000, p. 598).

DIALANG is effective in certain contexts because it utilises an innovative system in which a combination of pre-determined 'benchmarks' and self-assessment, are incorporated to estimate the candidate's speaking and writing skills, respectively. Needless to say, this relies on the candidate using realistic judgements in the process; however, there is no incentive to cheat, as the only person to lose will be the test-taker him/herself. Such innovation is appropriate in low-stakes or diagnostic tests; however it would not suit high-stakes tests which are used to help make employment or admissions decisions. Therefore human trained raters should continue to be used for such high-stakes tests as IELTS and TOEFL.

With the imminent launch of Computer Based IELTS (CB IELTS), a number of trials have been undertaken by the Research and Validation group at Cambridge ESOL, one of the IELTS partners. The purpose of these trials is to establish whether or not CB IELTS is comparable to its pen-and-paper counterpart (PB IELTS). In relation to the receptive skills of Listening and Reading, "The evidence gathered to date suggests that CB IELTS can be used interchangeably with PB IELTS and that candidates, given adequate computer familiarity, will perform equally well on either version of the test" (Green & Maycock, 2004, p. 6). Once again, this comparability is contingent upon a certain level of computer familiarity. However, in relation to marking the writing component of IELTS (which can be typed or handwritten), issues of scoring and the treatment of errors would need to be dealt with through examiner training and guidance (Green & Maycock, 2004, p. 6). The speaking component of IELTS will continue to be run via face-to-face interviews. Therefore, even though substantial inroads are being made in the area of voice-recognition techniques, for example, the role of specialised trained examiners in the testing process remains critical in high stakes tests.

### *The Use of the Internet*

The increasing use of the Internet has also presented both promises and challenges for test users. On the one hand, it is a very useful medium for the dissemination of information regarding tests, but on the other hand, the actual administration of tests via the Internet poses its own challenges. While the Internet has provided greater access to some computer-based tests, until now it has been considered too risky for high-stakes tests, such as TOEFL. In 2000, Alderson reported; “Not only might hackers break into the database and compromise items, but the difficulties of payment for registration, and the risk of impersonation, are considerable” (2000, p. 596). However, the new TOEFL test, (iBT) due to be first administered in the United States in September 2005, will be delivered via the Internet at registered centres throughout the world. This represents a quantum leap in the area of high-stakes language testing.

### *Practicality*

In addition to the fundamental issues of reliability and validity, the question of practicality must always be considered, particularly in the case of large-scale high stakes tests. In the first place, a test must be viable and cost-efficient, and the equipment needed to run the test efficiently must be readily available. In other words, sufficient up-to-date computer terminals should be provided, and be in working order. When the computer-based format for TOEFL was introduced in 1998, many well-established testing centres in the U.S and around the world became disenfranchised because of a lack of infrastructure needed to run the test. Even with the necessary hardware, the cost of running such a large-scale test could be prohibitive for some centres. On an even more pragmatic level, the consequences of the inevitable unforeseen temporary failure of technology on a high-stakes test could not only be serious, but costly. Even in the most technologically advanced institutions, the possibility of technical malfunction, however remote, is always a possibility that needs contingency plans put in place.

On the other hand, computer assisted tests have proven to be immensely more practical in many ways than their pen-and-paper counterparts. The overwhelming benefit of the computer-adaptive test, for example, is the flexibility with which it can be



administered, on a walk-in basis, for even a small group of students, with no need to host a single large administration at a pre-arranged time. There is also the added advantage of the reduction in time taken to complete the test, a unique feature of the computer-adaptive test.

In terms of item-banking, the computer is an ideal medium for storage of large banks of test items ready for instant retrieval, depending on the ability of the individual examinee. On the one hand, the way such a test is set up, means that each test is unique, since no two tests will present exactly the same set of items. On the other hand, however, because of the frequent exposure to such items due to small, ad hoc administrations (as opposed to large, fixed time administrations), it is necessary to keep a broad bank of items available at any given time. Furthermore, on some computer-based tests, omissions are allowed, while on others, candidates are not permitted to proceed to the next item until the previous one is answered. If omissions are allowed, this could lead to problems resulting from exposure to a greater range of items. This could affect the integrity of the test.

Computer-adaptive tests can also offer diagnostic feedback to students (if that is the purpose of the tests). This feedback can pinpoint the ability of the student with great precision through IRT. Because each test is unique, security is enhanced, with the elimination of possible repeated exposure to items. CATs are also designed to allow the students to work at their own pace, and their own level, thus causing less frustration and anxiety. In this way, such tests are more learner-centred, because of the fact that they can be uniquely tailored to the individual's level, rather than being too easy or too difficult, as might be the case with fixed format tests. As such, they can be used to combine language teaching and testing, providing immediate feedback on progress made. This is particularly useful for low-stakes tests.

Another practical application of CATs is the speed and accuracy of computerised scoring for clerically marked test components, where human raters can be substituted by technology. The advantages of this system are that the possibility of human error is eliminated, and it is much cheaper.

Finally, computer-based assessment offers the capacity to store enormous amounts of data which can be used later for research purposes; for example, item analysis, time taken to answer questions and levels of difficulty of test items. Overall, therefore, CATs offer substantial enhancement to the language testing process when used appropriately. All

in all, there is no one best test, but there is a most appropriate test for every purpose, and this may comprise a combination of test methods.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to the fundamental questions posed at the beginning of this essay, it would seem that CATs may well improve on pen-and-paper versions, but only in certain circumstances. From a pedagogical perspective, individual students can receive detailed diagnostic feedback on their performance, and greater accuracy can be achieved on scoring selected-response items. Limited exposure to masses of test items is made possible through item-banking, which has the dual advantage of preserving test integrity, while offering candidates a test made up only of those items with the appropriate levels of difficulty, as in the case of adaptive tests. From a practical perspective, CATs take less time, and candidates can work at their own pace, thus experiencing less frustration. Tests can also be taken on demand, thus eliminating the need to set up large-scale test administrations.

Technological advances have offered improvements in all walks of life, and language testing is no different; however, measuring these benefits is not so straightforward. In the case of high-stakes tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, research so far shows that in terms of test performance, there is an acceptable degree of comparison between scores obtained on computer-based tests and their pen-and-paper counterparts. However, this situation assumes a certain level of computer familiarity, and it is evident that the 'digital divide' separates many of our international students.

Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that different abilities are being measured across the two media, even where the scores obtained could be considered comparable. So the area of construct validity needs further research in terms of the skills being measured. On any test, the scores obtained should represent a realistic estimate of the skills and abilities being tested. The degree to which CATs can achieve this in the productive skills of writing and speaking needs further research. In particular, communicative language competence will always require the intervention of human scorers, or raters for marking. Furthermore, theoretical studies of writing suggest that there are fundamental differences between writing by hand and word-processing. However, what

is important to ascertain here is whether or not this would have an effect on the marks obtained.

While technology is already revolutionising the world of education and its related fields, there is always the danger that it will fail. For this reason, using a single medium of testing which relies heavily on technology can be both costly and risky. As a consequence, the pen and paper test versions should always be an option, particularly in high-stakes testing. This not only provides alternatives for those administering the test, it also offers test-takers the choice in how they take the test. For example, in addition to the computer-based version, IELTS will continue to offer the pen and paper version. “Providing a computer-based version simply gives candidates more choice in how they take IELTS” (UCLES, 2004, p. 4). This is important for those who wish to study in English-medium universities, but who have had limited access to computers.

Finally, the issue of access and equity needs to be considered. Although the literature indicates an increasing level of computer use and familiarity in most of the overseas student population, research has cautioned that access and use is not evenly distributed across different groups of students. For example, it is evident that a certain proportion of the African students in particular come from an environment which lacks the infrastructure needed to allow them regular access to computers. This has implications not just at the testing level, but throughout those students’ academic careers. Since this sector of the overseas student population in Australia is growing, provision will need to be made for them to receive the necessary instruction, if they are to stand on an equal footing with students from other countries.

Ultimately, the ways in which tests are used should be determined by the test-users themselves, bearing in mind the purpose for which the test is being used, the range of skills it is intended to test, and the best and fairest means of testing those skills. “Test-users need to be cognizant of the properties of the instruments they employ and ensure appropriate interpretation and use of test scores provided” (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000, p. 537).

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## **LINKING COMMENTARY: PAPER 2 TO PAPER 3**

Language testing is at a critical point in 2005. There are the dual pressures of increased candidature, and the mounting drive to embrace the 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, the availability of which can help to improve on test administration. In the context of overseas/international students applying to study in English-medium universities in various parts of the world, it is evident from previous papers that not only are actual numbers expanding, but so too is the range of nationalities and language backgrounds they represent. Part of the application process involves the use of tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, however the range of backgrounds of the potential students has implications for language test users and developers in terms of the types of skills that are tested, how this is determined and the fairness of those methods. At the same time, there is a tremendous push towards utilising the ever-expanding technological advances now available, to enhance test delivery. McNamara captures this concept well: “Language testing is a field in crisis, one which is masked by the impressive appearance of technological advance” (2000, p. 79). So, while there is a push towards the use of technology, there exist some impediments to utilising technology in language testing because of a number of constraints related to the medium of testing itself.

At the same time English-medium universities need to keep pace with the demands of an ever-expanding cohort of international students seeking places on a range of degree courses, but the process of language testing is just the start. Universities all over the world are now looking at a more global clientele, and need to make provision for the diversity represented by such students. To this end, most universities have incorporated the process of internationalisation into their policies and curricula. However, this involves a lot more than just offering more places for international students, and using more appropriate tests to select such students

Paper 3 will outline the challenges faced by universities in this regard, and the specific requirements involved for universities to be truly considered ‘internationalised’. These include the need to put in place mechanisms which ensure two-way communication and integration between local and international students, greater intercultural understanding at all levels, and, English support programmes.

In addition, specific problems experienced by overseas students in relation to studying in a western-type English medium university are outlined. These include culture shock, health problems (both physical and mental), ways of learning and applying knowledge, and, coping with the English language demands of their studies.

This paper will conclude with a list of recommendations for universities wishing to call their curricula truly internationalised. These suggestions may help to ensure that such universities are giving their international students every chance to succeed, and that any possible chance of discrimination on the basis of being from another country, is eliminated.

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## PAPER 3

### INTERNATIONALISING AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES: THE ISSUES INVOLVED

The past twenty years or so have seen a dramatic increase in the number of students who are non-native speakers (NNS) of English (many of whom come from Asia), wanting to gain overseas qualifications from an English speaking university. This now represents a huge potential market for various countries including the U.S.A, Canada, the U.K., Australia and New Zealand. A number of factors have helped to precipitate this trend – these include the increase in the number of student visas issued, the relaxation of laws restricting travel from various countries to Australia, the increasing trend towards the globalisation of employment and education, and more accessibility to information. At the same time in Australia, crippling cuts to government funding of universities have led to a need for alternative means of boosting revenue. While the overall dollar amount increased, the proportion of overall funding has decreased. This is demonstrated in Table 1, obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) which shows the sources of higher education funding for Australian universities in 1997 and 2002.

Table 1  
*Sources of Higher Education Funding*

	Units	1997	2002
Australian Government	%	53.8	40.1
State and territory governments	%	1.1	4.0
HECS(a)	%	14.7	15.8
Fees and charges	%	14.9	21.2
Fee paying domestic students	%	1.5	2.8
Fee paying overseas students	%	7.6	12.5
Other fees and charges	%	5.8	5.9
Other income(b)	%	15.4	18.9
Total	%	100.0	100.0
Total revenue	\$b	8.2	11.6

(a) Includes student contributions and Australian Government payments.

(b) Includes Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme, introduced in 2002; superannuation; investment income; royalties, trademarks and licenses; and consultancy and contract research.

Source: Department of Education, Science and Training, 'Selected Higher Education Finance Statistics, 1997'; 'Finance 2002: Selected Higher Education Statistics'.



One way to counter this decrease in funding has been to increase the number of places available to overseas full-fee paying students (e.g., Marginson, 2002; Illing, 2004; Macklin, 2002). This has been so successful that it was recently reported that “International student fees make up approximately 14 per cent, or \$1.7 billion, of total university revenue in Australia, and international students constitute about 25 per cent of the total student population” (Tater, 2005).

The phenomenal increase in overseas student numbers has brought about a range of challenges, such as the integration of many diverse cultures and language backgrounds into university life in a way that is beneficial for everyone. It also involves catering for the diverse nature of the student body, and the provision of an international focus in all courses, both at the curriculum and policy levels. In turn this presents a number of tensions, particularly for the stakeholders concerned with the ‘internationalisation’ of the curriculum. This paper will outline some of the issues pertaining to the internationalisation of university curricula. These include the perceptions and expectations of international students, English language issues, plagiarism, differences in learning styles, different levels of computer literacy amongst international students, cultural and social issues, and problems with the health of overseas students. These issues are all underpinned by the need for universities to adopt a pragmatic two-way approach to internationalisation. Therefore when accepting overseas students, universities need to accommodate their various needs. “As an educational approach, internationalised education requires more than a diverse body of students, assembled primarily as an economic imperative. It also requires that the practices of the universities themselves be modified and adapted” (Liddicoat, 2003, p. 17).

## **Background**

The internationalisation of any university can be broadly viewed in terms of the curriculum involved, and the overall university environment. In this paper curriculum is broadly defined as the content imparted and the method/medium of delivery. Content refers to the subject matter involved in any particular course of study, while the delivery relates to the way in which it happens (lectures, tutorials, online delivery).

Internationalising the university curriculum is not simply a matter of offering the same courses to international students, nor is it a case of merely adding international components

to the content or delivery. Instead in order to internationalise the curriculum universities need to take into account a range of concepts connected with the way in which students learn. The challenge is to do so in a manner that is mutually beneficial to local and overseas students. The OECD (1994) takes account of these demands when it defines internationalised curricula as:

Curricula with an international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally/socially) in an international and multicultural context and designed for domestic students as well as foreign students.

Overall, more and more places are being made available for international (overseas) students in Australia, not just in the major cities but also in regional centres. Not only are numbers increasing; the range of cultures and backgrounds they represent is also expanding. Traditionally, Australia has been a popular choice for students from South-East Asia, but in recent times more places are being offered to students from the Middle East and Africa. This indeed represents enhanced opportunities for these potential students; likewise it offers wonderful possibilities for the enrichment of university life through the constantly evolving student base. In other words, the face of the university is changing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the profile of the student body represents a collective tapestry of histories, which need to be blended in order to achieve productive harmony. Therefore the curriculum should take into account the myriad resources provided by the international student body and capitalise on its potential to provide a truly international curriculum.

Secondly, universities need to recognise the implications of creating a multicultural student base, and to accommodate this by providing the appropriate environment that acknowledges, caters for and benefits from the diversity represented by the total student body. At the same time universities need to recognise that this is a world of globalisation and multi-national companies where graduates are becoming more and more likely to encounter international and intercultural perspectives not only in the society in which they live, but also in the ever-changing workforce. Therefore, if a university is to prepare its students for life in the global community, then it should reflect these international and intercultural perspectives. This includes:

- Preparing staff and students for life in the global community;
- Developing partnerships (teaching/research) with overseas institutions;
- Developing cross-cultural awareness among all staff and students;

- Benefiting from the multicultural nature of the student and staff body;
- Providing opportunities for study abroad/student exchange/internship overseas.

Therefore, internationalising universities involves inherent challenges.

### **Challenges to the Market**

Universities seeking to be truly international need to be ever-attentive to what the market perceives, expects and wants. For this reason, a university's reputation and popular perception about the role of internationalisation are important, and need to be tactfully managed. On the one hand, for example, overseas students are all too aware of the critical role they play in providing badly needed funds to a financially starved education system, but on the other hand their expectations need to be acknowledged. In other words, they need to feel wanted and valued, and that they will be able to benefit from their university education in the same way as any other student, regardless of origin, and without disadvantage.

In order to promote a positive perception of Australian tertiary education among overseas students, it is important for universities to be sensitive to the possible effects of regional or even global threats to the overseas student market. Several such events have occurred in recent years. One such example was when the then newly-elected Queensland MP Pauline Hanson, who in her now infamous maiden speech in the late 1990s, announced that we in Australia were 'in danger of being swamped by Asians'. This declaration understandably received very negative press in the region, and did considerable damage in that it portrayed Australia as a racist country. A few years later, the much-reported Tampa crisis and subsequent events relating to asylum seekers in late 2001 drew world attention to Australia's apparent lack of compassion. Next the collapse of the World Trade Centre Twin Towers in New York on September 11 that year, led to a series of anti-Muslim attacks throughout Australia, and negative sentiments towards Muslims were felt among the overseas student community, many of whom experienced overt hostility, particularly in public places. Such feelings were exacerbated by events that occurred a year later when 88 Australians were among over 200 killed when two bomb blasts hit the holiday resort island of Bali. The most recent event to threaten relationships between Australian universities and their students was the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which

necessitated the isolation of students travelling from affected countries, and in some cases, being refused permission to travel.

While such events are both regrettable and unavoidable, they send out powerful messages, and need to be responded to in a prompt and positive fashion in order to allay fears that Australia in general, and by implication universities in particular, are resistant if not openly hostile to outsiders. One of the ways of doing this is to recognise the possible detrimental effect of such events, and to ensure that such attitudes are not reflected by university staff.

### *English Language Issues*

For non-native speakers (NNS) of English studying in Australia, the single biggest threat to academic success (on the surface, at least) would appear to be English language proficiency. Students need to meet minimum English standards set down by the universities, using internationally recognised tests, usually either the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL); however these only reflect minimum recommended cut-off points, and can therefore fall short of the range of linguistic demands required to complete a degree. For international students, there is a web of intricate problems bound up in the language they use, in the way they express themselves, and in their way of constructing meaning. Therefore, most international students are destined to need ongoing English language support if their first language is not English.

A number of studies have been undertaken in Australia and New Zealand, exploring the relationship between English language proficiency as determined by IELTS, and subsequent academic performance (Bellingham, 1993; Dooley & Oliver 2002; Elder, 1993; Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000). These studies have led to considerable debate about whether or not the English language cut-off points set by the receiving institutions allow sufficient scope for students in ensuring them a reasonable chance of success. Most of the findings indicate, however, that language is but one of a range of factors contributing to academic success, and that there has to be an accepted minimum cut-off point below which students are deemed to run the risk of failure because of the problems they encounter with the English language. While English language support

units are certainly available, they are not always compulsory, nor credit-bearing, and therefore many students who are already struggling with an academic workload and other problems, see it as an additional burden.

The ways in which English language support is offered vary from institution to institution, and a concerted effort is being made on most campuses with a substantial international student body to provide back-up where necessary. Further, the need for sensitivity about the requirements of NNS students needs to extend to all mainstream courses. However, for many faculty members, English is seen as an isolated subject, when in fact it is a medium of communication which permeates all courses in university. As such, English language support involves more than just providing additional classes, and so all subject lecturers need to be committed to structuring their course content to cater for the needs of NNS students, since those students are making up an increasing proportion of their course enrolments.

As most courses involve a substantial lecture component, students need to have the appropriate listening skills to cope with this. Even though the traditional lecture format has been augmented by technological advances, the dominant medium of instruction in universities is still the lecture (Ramsden, 1992). Alternative modes of delivery, for example WebCT, offer students the opportunity to listen to lectures more than once, and the current trend is moving towards providing students with hard copy transcripts, or even electronic copies in advance. Nonetheless, in order to make some sense of the lecture content, it is necessary for the students to take notes themselves. For many NNS students, taking notes in a large lecture theatre with multiple distractions is a bewildering experience. Even those students who are considered to have a reasonable grasp of the language to start with, can have serious problems when it comes to listening. Much research has been done in the area of reading and writing for academic purposes, but less work has been done to investigate the process of listening and lecture comprehension, which appears to be particularly difficult. This suggestion is supported by the findings of a team of researchers at Warwick University, UK who produced a CD-Rom to help NNS students to cope with lectures.

They also carried out a survey of students on campus to find out what they found difficult, and by far the most frequent request for help was with taking notes while listening. (de Lotbiniere, 2003, p. 7)

A study was also undertaken in Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia by Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000) to investigate the nature and extent of problems experienced by NNS students in comprehending lectures. They found that “....many lecturers are still failing to accommodate the cultural and linguistic diversity of the classes they teach” (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000, p. 311). The problems facing NNS students are not just because of the fact that their first language is not English, but also because they are rooted in another socio-linguistic and cultural model, and therefore their difficulties do not lie merely in the mechanics, but with the complex and dynamic nature of language. The Curtin University study therefore recommended that a set of guidelines be produced for lecturers to improve the process of delivering lectures, the comprehension of these by students, and, the academic interaction that occurs as part of this. If such recommendations were put in place this would be useful for NNS and NS (native speaker) students alike.

Other language problems experienced by international students relate to the fact that these students' expectations in general are not matched within the actual experience. In other words, they are ill-prepared for the magnitude of the linguistic tasks required of them. For example, although students go to great lengths to meet English language requirements, they often find that in reality the 'minimum level' falls short of the demands of academic life. Worse still, for those who are planning to take pre-service courses in the host country, this process may take much longer than they anticipated. Overseas agents often provide estimates, in terms of time, as to how long it will take to be ready to undertake a degree, but of course, there are many variables here, and it is almost impossible to put accurate time limits on such a complex matter as mastering English. Many students take the IELTS test (either in their home country or in the host country) to assess their English language proficiency, but if they fail to reach the required scores, they must wait a statutory period of three months before re-sitting the test. This may result in missing out on university intake, and a whole range of other factors intervene, for example, scholarships and visas. In turn, if successful in commencing their chosen course, many students find that their lack of English is often perceived as lack of ability, which is often far from the case. This in turn leads to other problems, including emotional issues (for instance, perceptions of poor ability based on English language proficiency may lead to 'loss of face'). Thus it can be seen that issues of English language are indeed complex and need to be appropriately managed.

Finally, there needs to be shift away from the attitude that internationalisation should happen exclusively from an English-speaking standpoint. Liddicoat (2003) argues that the concept of internationalisation is not really clear, and that the monolingual, monocultural perspective that is dominant in Australian universities, is problematic. He believes that:

As such, internationalisation lacks the dimension of diversity which comes from an interaction with the wider multilingual academic world, and therefore does not adequately reflect the rhetoric of plurality and interculturality which accompanies proposals for internationalisation. (Liddicoat, 2003, p. 23)

Therefore a healthy approach to learning about others' cultures and languages, and to using them as a resource, would help to develop an appreciation of the reciprocal potential involved in enrolling international students. Windshuttle and Elliot (in the context of Australians) note that "People from other cultures need to learn our language, but we are not forced to learn theirs. As a result, they tend to know much more about us than we do about them" (1994, p. 488). If this is indeed the case, Australian universities need to recognise and capitalise on the range of benefits associated with the presence of international students on campus.

### **Plagiarism**

At the heart of the integrity of any academic institution is the value placed on individual, original work. Conversely, universities take a very dim view of those who use the work of others and pass it off as their own. This is known as plagiarism, or, put more bluntly, cheating. In an age when an infinite amount of material is easily accessible via the Internet, plagiarism was never so easy. Recent reports indicate that the problem is far more widespread than one would imagine. For example, in the US:

On most campuses, over 75% of students admit to some cheating. In a 1999 survey of 2,100 students on 21 campuses across the country, about one-third of the participating students admitted to serious test cheating and half admitted to one or more instances of serious cheating on written assignments.

([http://www.academicintegrity.org/cai\\_research.asp](http://www.academicintegrity.org/cai_research.asp))

In Australia, in a survey of 1800 academic staff:

Most – 54 per cent - thought the practice [*of plagiarism*] had increased; 45 per cent that it had not changed significantly; and only one per cent that it had decreased. (Anderson, Johnson & Saha, 2002, p. 44)

Another survey carried out in six Victorian universities, believed to be the first comprehensive survey to detect the level of plagiarism in Australian universities, found that ‘8.85 per cent of the essays contained unattributed text copied from other sources that make up 25 per cent or more of the total word count’ (Buckell, 2002). The problem is compounded by greater workloads on academics and students, larger classes and different cultural backgrounds, making it more difficult for plagiarism to be detected (Illing, 2003a).

While the problem is endemic in universities, right across the board from academics to undergraduates, it is probably the overseas students who, because of their linguistic shortcomings, are the most obvious perpetrators. For some, the pressure to pass is so great that they will not let anything stand in their way. For most, however, the underlying cause of plagiarism is more fundamental. South-East Asian students, for example, are simply paying homage to those who are considered ‘enlightened’ by reproducing their work without interference or alteration.

It is only when western universities truly understand the dominant paradigm which drives the thinking of such students, that an attempt can be made to address the problem. The most constructive way of doing this is by teaching correct referencing conventions to all students, not just those whose first language is not English. For many, failure to adhere to correct referencing conventions stems more from ignorance than anything else. They simply lack experience in the specific language necessary for the task.

On the other hand, there is a commonly held view that, since the introduction of the Internet, it has never been easier to graduate. One Western Australian student guild magazine offered an article on how to ‘Copy. Paste. Graduate!’ While this represented a tongue-in-cheek perspective, what was alarming was that:

A survey of almost 1,000 students across all levels at two Melbourne universities, Monash and Swinburne, found almost 80 percent had cheated at least once. Plagiarism was the most frequent form of fraud in the survey, and the Internet was the most likely source. (Copy. Paste. Graduate! 2003).

Once incidences of plagiarism are reported, other problems can emerge; for example, damage to a university’s reputation (Illing, 2003b), alienation of lecturing staff



(Shneider, 1999), and, the tarnishing of student-staff relationships can make staff members reluctant to pursue incidences of plagiarism. In this regard, plagiarism has been described by Sutherland-Smith (2005, p. 83) as ‘a kind of Pandora’s box – the elements contained inside are too frightening to allow escape for fear of the havoc that may result’. In addition, it is difficult to make policies related to plagiarism because of the need to define the notion, the intent associated with the act, and varying attitudes towards plagiarism, among both staff and students (Park, 2003).

For English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, there are other problems associated with having to conform to more western attitudes towards plagiarism. These attitudes can be quite different to those they have experienced previously, and varying considerably from the cultural traditions from which they come. From a cultural perspective, therefore, overseas students may take more time to appreciate the western approach to academic ownership; however, most do respond to the view that the teacher is ‘master’ and his/her authority is to be respected. Because of this, failure to reference correctly would be seen as failure to please the teacher, and therefore, learning about and adhering to the required referencing conventions as early as possible, should be encouraged. The problem of plagiarism can at least be partially overcome by helping students develop a better understanding of what is involved, and by assisting them to master the academic language skills required of them in their tertiary studies.

### **Learning Styles**

Any learning situation which involves both teachers and students from different backgrounds has the potential to be problematic if not given due recognition and understanding. Hofstede (1986) produced a model of cultural differences among societies and applied this to the teaching/learning situation:

Teaching to a student or student body with a cognitive ability profile different from what the teacher is accustomed to is evidently problematic; it demands a different didactic approach, for which the teacher may lack the proper cognitive abilities. At the same time, the surrounding environment usually reinforces people in their traditional cognitive ways and makes learning more difficult. There is no other solution to bridging this gap than increasing awareness, sustained effort on both sides, focussing on new abilities demanded by societal changes of the moment and patience. (Hofstede, 1986, p. 305)

With more and more cultures coming together with the common goal of learning, his comments are particularly pertinent to universities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The implications of this 'gap' between different learning styles are manifested in the ways in which overseas students cope with the range of activities they will be required to undertake. In particular, group activities, critical thinking and relationships with teachers can require significant adjustment.

### *Group Work*

Group work is becoming an integral part of assessment in university life. While there are a number of problems with group work that are common to all, (for example, the task of getting all members of the group to do equal work for equal marks is in itself fraught), the problems associated with being involved in group work are compounded in culturally diverse groups. One of the obvious problems for non-native speakers is being able to 'speak up', to contribute at the appropriate time, and to be listened to. While the language limitations are an obvious impediment, the true difficulties run a lot deeper, with many students lacking the apparent audacity to be forward or direct when providing a contribution, or worse, to interrupt one another. This practice can be perfectly acceptable in western cultures, where one anticipates what is to follow, but this is not at all the case in other cultures.

Discourse analysts who study conversation note that speakers have systems for determining when one person's turn is over and the next person's turn begins. The exchange of turns or 'floors' is signalled by such linguistic means as intonation, pausing, and phrasing. Some people await a clear pause before beginning to speak, but others assume that 'winding down' is an invitation to someone else to take the floor. When speakers have different assumptions about how turn exchanges are signalled, they may inadvertently interrupt or feel interrupted. On the other hand, speakers also frequently take the floor even though they know the other speaker has not invited them to do so. (Tannen, 2003, p. 1)

Different language/cultural systems view not only turn-taking, but also silence, in different ways. The implications of this are that, for example, silence can be misinterpreted as lack of interest or even laziness, while the appearance of 'consensus' can mask conflict. This means that agreement can be seen to be reached, when in fact, some members of the group may not be happy, but may be too shy to speak, or may even be intimidated either by group members or by the dynamics of the group. Such problems are very common at university, and can prove to be an enormous impediment to the success of group projects.

In fact, there is a range of communication problems which frequently lead to group dysfunction; however these are compounded by differences in the way varying cultures interact. The inherent cultural diversity represented in Australian universities, therefore, presents serious challenges for students and teachers alike. As a consequence there is a strong need for staff, local students and overseas students alike to be made aware of the possible communication difficulties that may arise, so that the teaching and learning culture is inclusive of all backgrounds. In this way, with some knowledge about the principles of the cultures represented, the difficulties such a situation presents may be avoided, or at least minimised.

### *Previous Learning Experience*

Entering a university for the first time is indeed a novel and sometimes bewildering experience for many students. For both local and international students alike, the learning environment represents a stark contrast to their previous learning history. However, the situation for international students is particularly complex, and it is not easy for them to adapt if they are not aware of what exactly the system expects of them:

Different cultural traditions do embody different attitudes to knowledge. All may agree that the pursuit of truth is a basic goal; but judgements as to the nature of truth and the paths by which it is to be attained can vary greatly. Beneath the superficial similarities of higher education across national boundaries there often lie fundamentally dissimilar approaches to teaching and learning. It is these culturally shaped differences, seldom recognised, yet colouring the whole educational enterprise, which cause many of the problems encountered in teaching overseas students. (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991, p. 10)

Western universities expect a culture of creating 'new' knowledge through the questioning and evaluation of existing knowledge and theories. For example, students are expected to read a range of books, articles and journals, evaluate them and provide judgements, or reasoned arguments. This requires the skill of critical thinking, which is considered a healthy approach to acquiring knowledge in western upper secondary schools and beyond. There is a natural progression from the reproductive through to the analytical and speculative approach to learning as students move into tertiary study. However, the picture is very different if one looks at attitudes towards knowledge in other cultures. In Confucian heritage cultures, for example, it is unheard of to question the wisdom of those

in authority, scholars or sages. Similarly, in the Islamic tradition, great value is placed on having a thorough and accurate knowledge of the Koran. Given that many of our overseas students come from Confucian or Islamic based cultures, the transition to thinking critically can be both challenging and confusing. Therefore, despite their desire to master a western style of learning, the process of adjustment may take some time.

A critical approach to knowledge and ideas is fundamental to all areas of university study – lectures, tutorials, seminar discussions, independent reading, but most of all in assignment and essay writing. This critical approach becomes increasingly important as students progress into the latter stages of their degrees, and particularly in postgraduate work. Therefore, it is very important for university staff to be aware of the nature of the prior learning experience of their overseas students and how certain aspects of this experience may impede their progress in western universities.

### *Teacher/Student Roles*

Another aspect of academic life which provides specific challenges to international students (particularly students from South-East Asia) is the problem of coming to terms with the roles of teacher/lecturer and student. Firstly, for many international students the teacher must be treated with the greatest of respect (particularly if he/she is ranked highly), a practice which does not appear to be common in western universities, and therefore requires considerable adjustment on their part:

Many overseas students feel shocked and embarrassed at the disrespectful behaviour of Australian students in the presence of their teachers. They also feel awkward with the informality displayed – calling a lecturer by his, or even worse her, first name, remaining seated when the professor enters the room, walking through a door ahead of a tutor. (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991, p. 19)

Secondly, many of these students have to adapt to the unfamiliar role of becoming an independent learner. Once again, this has roots in those students' prior learning experience, where the teacher is totally responsible for the students' learning and success. The teacher is also expected to be able to provide all the knowledge the students need to pass their exams, and leave no 'gaps' or uncertainties. Sample summaries or essays are often interpreted by overseas students as models to be imitated, rather than good examples of what might be acceptable for the particular course being studied. If such students faithfully reproduce the information they have acquired, there is little room for the type of

interpretation, discussion and critical analysis referred to earlier. This is not to say that a reproductive approach per se should be discouraged; in fact, it can prove very constructive when used in conjunction with other methods of learning in order to enhance understanding, as has been demonstrated by Biggs (1992) using the Study Processes Questionnaire.

The need to develop independent learning skills is even more crucial in postgraduate courses, where the expectations of the role of a supervisor might be misinterpreted by even the most diligent student, who genuinely believes that success with his thesis is virtually guaranteed, so long as he puts in the time and follows the advice of his supervisor. Little wonder, then, that the student is confused when asked to go to the library to undertake some preliminary investigations into his topic via the latest journal articles.

Ultimately a degree obtained through an English medium university is highly valued by overseas students, and the institution is just as keen as the students are to achieve academic success. However, if quality standards are to be maintained, a clear understanding of what is expected of students is necessary, and this needs to be made explicit so that international students can be helped to overcome the many academic hurdles that they face.

### **Computer Literacy**

While a large proportion of overseas students studying in Australian universities come from South-East Asia, substantial inroads are being made by organisations such as International Development Programs (IDP) Education Australia to offer educational opportunities to students from developing countries, including Africa. Increasing numbers of African students are being enrolled in Australian universities, many of whom have specific issues (other than those already discussed) which may affect their academic performance. Firstly, many of them have lived through the trauma of war and subsequent periods of residence in refugee camps, and most have been at least indirectly affected by the HIV virus. On a more pragmatic level, however, many African students have minimal computer skills. In a survey of international students' preparedness for computer use in college in North America across a 20-month period between 1996 and 1997, Taylor, Jamieson & Eignor (2000) found that computer use was lowest among students from Africa, "where in fall 1997 only 44% claimed to use computers weekly, and 24.5%

reported never having used a computer” (p. 579). This situation may be attributed to lack of infrastructure and trained teachers, but it raises important questions of equity and access, particularly in relation to the idea of the university adapting its curriculum for an international market with a changing clientele. Although these figures have changed in recent years, many African students are still disadvantaged in this regard.

### **Cultural/Social Issues**

While adapting to the academic culture in a western university certainly involves challenge for our overseas students, they also encounter a range of cultural and social problems.

Students entering (graduate) studies for the first time have generally left an established and successful pattern of work, family and friends; feelings about that adjustment, as well as worried about situations they have left behind all impact on their work. They come from academic and non-academic backgrounds; from cultures with written traditions and those without; from trauma and peace; from cultures with traditions of conserving knowledge and those with traditions of extending knowledge; from traditions where the louder one speaks, the more right one is; and those where maintaining silence is a mark of respect. (Bartlett, Holzknecht, & Cumming Thom 1999, p. ix)

Once again, many of these problems may be generic to all students, but the process of adjustment may take more time and patience on the part of those who are recent arrivals, most of whom experience some form of culture shock upon arrival in the host environment. Culture shock has been defined as an intermediate stage in the process of acculturation. The term itself was coined by American anthropologist Oberg (1901-1973), who suggested that culture shock resulted from anxiety over losing familiar signs and symbols. The basic model defined by Oberg (1960) has been adopted and refined by many others over the years. Levine and Adelman (1982), for instance, identified five distinct stages in the process of adjustment to the new culture, each “characterised by symptoms or outward signs typifying certain kinds of behaviour” (p. 42). These are: the honeymoon period, culture shock, initial adjustment, mental isolation, and acceptance and integration. These stages are commonly represented by a ‘W’ shape, characterising the emotional ups and downs of adjusting to a new life. The journey through the various stages of this ‘W’ figure is often compared to a roller coaster ride, where the newcomer is emotionally high one minute, and low the next. Culture shock applies both to short, or temporary stays, and to

permanent stays, and the stages described last varying lengths of time depending on the newcomer's age, personality, language and cultural competence, and according to the support they receive from family and friends, their financial situation, job status, and what motivation underpins their presence in the new country.

Culture shock can be experienced by anyone moving from one culture to another, but is more likely to be felt by those who have the added burden of a language barrier. Even the most basic understanding of culture shock, particularly if it stems from first hand experience, can go a long way towards explaining why so many students may not perform to the best of their ability during the early stages of adjustment to life in a new environment. In this sense, encouraging staff and student exchanges could help to develop a more empathetic approach to facilitating students' success, especially during this transition phase.

Even when the transition to a new culture has occurred, there will still remain inherent differences in the ways in which various cultures perceive the world, and these will affect both the learning and the social environment. Such differences are well documented in the work of anthropologist Hall (1959), who believed that the basic differences in the way that members of different cultures perceived reality were responsible for miscommunications of the most fundamental kind. His main premise was that in addition to learning other people's languages we must also grasp the need for what he termed 'cultural literacy'. This is generally defined as the ability to be sensitive to, and understanding of, the ways of being that are determined by different cultures. For example, cultures vary greatly as to what they find acceptable (or offensive) in terms of conversational distance, eye contact, body contact and relationships between genders, and an understanding of these aspects contributes to assisting learners from such cultures to be accepted and well functioning in their new environment.

Hall proposed five major categories of difference between cultures. These are: space, time, verbal behaviour, non-verbal behaviour and context. In the case of context, for example, Hall drew broad definitions between what he called 'high context cultures' and 'low context cultures'. High context cultures (for example, the Chinese, the Japanese and some Middle Eastern cultures) rely heavily on non-verbals and shared understanding. They tend towards conservative, well-defined class structures where individual needs are sacrificed to group goals. For example, the director of a company is solely responsible for

its success (or failure). Furthermore, a person is bound to his/her word. On the other hand, low context cultures, which typically tend to be found in the West, rely on legal documents to make contracts binding. The explicit word has more meaning than the context in which it appears, and people do not bother much about the background of those with whom they converse.

While Hall's classification of cultures represents just one particular view, if at all representative it has huge implications for those working in multicultural classrooms. For example, it may help to explain a range of very different attitudes towards time and tardiness, space and physical proximity, and what is said and what is understood. Such information could go a long way towards helping university lecturers to understand some of the apparent difficulties experienced by their overseas students.

### ***Giving International Students a Voice***

Finally if international students are to feel truly part of the university, they need to have a voice. However, for certain groups of students, it is culturally inappropriate to come forward and to speak out. This is because they are reluctant to voice their grievances to authorities, and their background tells them that they have obligations rather than rights. One way around this is to make provision for international student representation on those committees that make decisions directly involving these students (for instance, resources for students, guilds, choosing a new medical insurance provider).

### **Health Issues**

The sheer magnitude of studying in a new environment can create stress which manifests in a number of ways, and can ultimately affect students' physical and mental health. However, students such as those from South-East Asian backgrounds are sometimes reluctant to seek assistance when they first encounter these problems because of the nature of health and counselling services on campus. While such services are indeed provided, South-East Asian cultures are not always represented among the staff, and the students are not always inclined to approach western people for help. As a result, the problems simply fester and become much more serious.



A tragic example of the consequences of stress among overseas students occurred in October 2002, at Monash University, Melbourne, when student Xian Huan Yun opened fire with two handguns during an econometrics tutorial. Two students, both doing honours at the Department of Econometrics and Business Statistics, were killed, and five others, including a lecturer were injured. This incident served to highlight a situation which could have been prevented, had the student received the appropriate counselling in time.

For many international students, the feeling of 'self' away from home is very different from the 'self' at home. This in turn affects their self-esteem, and increases the sense of isolation felt by so many. As a consequence, they tend to seek comfort among those from similar backgrounds, thus increasing the divide between local and overseas students. While overseas students seem to mingle well with peers from other countries, the integration of international students with local students appears to be generally less successful. "International and multicultural student campuses represent ideal social forums for promoting cultural understanding: offering tolerance of diversity; discovering alternative ways of thinking; and developing inter-cultural skills" (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 6). However, this can only be achieved with the commitment of all students and staff. Therefore, initiatives which would foster communication between cultures should be encouraged.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that universities all over Australia are working hard to enhance opportunities to create a truly international curriculum, including putting into place the appropriate policies relating to diversity, equity issues, and racial and religious tolerance. However, a number of tensions still exist among overseas students. Firstly, international students' expectations are often not met by reality. Therefore, universities wanting to compete in a globalised market need to look carefully at their marketing strategies, and make sure that they are both accurate and realistic about what they promise to a diverse clientele base. Teaching staff in particular need to be explicit about their expectations for all students, and especially for overseas students. It is not safe to simply assume that they will know what to do and what is expected. Secondly, overseas students provide valuable financial input to cash-starved universities, but in the current consumer-based environment,

those students also have rights, for example the right to be fully informed about what to expect, the right not to be disadvantaged because of racial or cultural background, and the right to be represented when decisions affecting them are being made. Universities need to provide every opportunity for international students to achieve their goals, and to overcome the barriers they may encounter along the way, so that they are well placed to receive full returns on their investment. Thirdly, the issue of English language proficiency is always a vexed one, and ongoing support is desirable, if not necessary for many. Plagiarism needs to be addressed, but the more proficient the students become, the less likely they are to plagiarise; in fact, a positive attitude towards preventing plagiarism should be adopted, with the emphasis on education. Fourthly, the importance of cultural awareness and its critical role in all facets of academic life cannot be overemphasised. This knowledge may be the key to solving such problems as failure to submit assignments, failure to attend class, or difficulties with group assignments. Finally, for many overseas students, mental health and physical health (or lack thereof) are intricately bound, and they sometimes present with somatic problems, which mask stress or even culture shock. Such problems can become much more serious if not dealt with early. Therefore, all university staff should be equipped so that they are able to recognise the warning signs.

### **Recommendations**

A broad appreciation of the issues highlighted above and their implications within a multicultural setting would go a long way towards achieving intercultural harmony on campus. Certainly, the more that local staff and students know about the diverse cultures represented within the student body, the richer the experience for all. While it would be impossible to learn about every culture and language, general guidelines, mostly based on common sense and mutual respect, could enhance communication across all cultures. Such guidelines should be offered to all staff (including janitorial, counter staff and academics) and students, so that the experience is mutually beneficial. To this end, a university wanting to internationalise its curriculum needs to make provision for:

- English language support programs (for both undergraduates and postgraduates);
- Suitable study support programs, which cater for different learning styles/prior experience of learning;

- Initiatives designed to help all staff and students to become culturally aware and sensitive;
- Access to trained counsellors who have the appropriate cross-cultural backgrounds and skills;
- Integration between local and international students in a non-threatening environment;
- Appropriate support specifically designed for international students, from enrolment through to graduation, including representation on committees;
- Chaplaincy that covers a range of diverse religious backgrounds.

In an environment where there is increasing diversity among students, they should all be able to learn both with and about each other. “Learning in educational institutions should be about changing the ways in which learners understand, or experience, or conceptualise the world around them” (Ramsden, 1992, p. 4).

The final link in the internationalisation loop must be a process of following the plan, delivering what is promised, and taking the challenge to the end. This means providing inclusive support, both academic and cultural, to all clients, regardless of background. If a student is accepted onto any course, the onus lies with the university to ensure that he/she is not disadvantaged by lack of access to the appropriate support along the path to academic success.

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## **LINKING COMMENTARY: PAPER 3 TO PAPER 4**

The task of ensuring that Australian universities are truly internationalised is therefore more challenging than simply providing places for increasing numbers of international students. Internationalisation is a two-way process and therefore universities seeking to provide a genuine international approach need to embrace the benefits of having other languages and cultures on campus rather than simply highlighting deficiencies of overseas students. Furthermore there is a need for an understanding of different learning styles rather than simply imposing one 'right way'. Different behaviour attributable to variations in cultural backgrounds should be understood rather than criticised. Students need to know and understand clearly what is expected of them as students, and what they can expect from the institution. As part of the two-way process, internationalisation involves the commitment of staff and both local and international students. Finally, overseas students provide much-needed revenue to Australian universities, and therefore should be offered a fair and reasonable chance to receive due return for their investment.

Part of this return rests with universities providing adequate and appropriate support. This is required in a number of areas, however, the most apparent difficulties faced by international students relate to their English language skills, and much research has been undertaken in this regard. While the macroskills of reading and writing have been extensively investigated, less is known about the specific listening and speaking skills required to participate effectively in tertiary studies. In an environment where the dominant mode of instruction is still the lecture (even with variations in delivery) overseas students are faced with inherent listening difficulties, both academic and general.

Paper 4 begins with a review of some recent studies which looked at the listening and speaking needs of tertiary students whose first language is not English. It has generally been found that students are not always the best judges of the listening and speaking skills they need to function in English-speaking institution. By the same token, however, subject lecturers were not always aware of the specific needs and difficulties of their students, nor did they understand the reasons for such difficulties.

This paper also provides the results of a small-scale study which is a replication of a much larger scale comparative needs analysis study carried out in the US by Ferris in 1998. The current study was carried out on the English Language Bridging Program (ELBC),

which is run by Curtin University's Department of Languages and Intercultural Education. This is a pre-tertiary course for overseas students from a variety of disciplines and cultures, who have completed undergraduate study in their own country, but who need the necessary English/academic skills to undertake a degree (either undergraduate or postgraduate) at Curtin. The Bridging Course comprises four units, Academic Writing, English Communication, Tertiary Studies Skills and English for Specific Purposes. The total course is of one semester's duration. A pass on the Bridging Course will lead to direct entry to the student's chosen course of study.

The aim of the study was to find out the perceived needs and difficulties of the students, in terms of their listening and speaking skills. This study was undertaken from both students' and lecturers' perspectives, and a comparison of these was made. It was found that students and lecturers identified different problems in this regard; however there did appear to be considerable agreement that general listening comprehension skills were a priority. It is important to note here that the results of this study pertain only to the ELBC, which is undertaken by students who are preparing for their mainstream courses. As such, they can not be expected to be fully aware of the range of language skills needed in their chosen course; however, the results can be used to inform future ELBC courses, and they certainly shed some light on the problems faced by new arrivals particularly. Further studies were undertaken with a larger cohort and are detailed in Papers 5 and 6. In these later papers, the results of interviews are reported, where former ELBC students provide details of specific problems they have faced, both during the Bridging course and in their first semester of mainstream study.



## **PAPER 4**

### **IDENTIFYING THE LISTENING AND SPEAKING NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

#### **Abstract**

In this study, a four-part survey was administered to a class of 18 students studying on the English Language Bridging Course at Curtin University to find out more about their perceived listening and speaking language needs. This course is of one semester's duration, and is designed to prepare overseas students for mainstream study. These students have met all academic admissions requirements for enrolment at Curtin University, with the exception of the level of their English language proficiency. In addition to the students, seven English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors completed part of the survey, providing their impressions of the perceived needs of the students. While the perceptions of students and instructors generally differed, both groups seemed to be in agreement about the importance of listening skills for academic success. This study was a small-scale replication of a previous study carried out by Ferris (1998) with ESL students in three institutions in California, and like the current study, provides some useful input for future groups of students preparing for mainstream studies.

#### **Background**

In any teaching situation, to keep abreast with current trends, it is necessary to update and fine-tune both the curriculum and the texts chosen. Needs analysis has been one way to do this as it allows those undertaking such a process to find out what students need, and to use this to inform curriculum planning. Without such investigations, course developers tend to simply estimate the possible needs of their future students. The information thus gleaned is crucial in the case of overseas students preparing for their mainstream courses, in particular those trying to improve their English language skills to the point where they can compete on an equal footing with local students in the tertiary environment.

It is important to try to ascertain the specific language difficulties faced by such students, both before and during their mainstream studies, so that the content selected suits the range of language and cultural backgrounds represented. While the move towards tertiary studies presents challenges for all students, overseas students face specific problems, however, once these are recognised they can be addressed through appropriate teaching and intervention.

At this point it is worthwhile to draw the distinction between 'subject-lecturers' and 'ESL lecturers/tutors'. Those classified as subject lecturers are lecturing in a specialised field/faculty/department within a university, in a situation where the dominant medium of instruction is the lecture, which can take a number of forms. Lectures, for instance, may take place in a large group setting with up to 450 students present at one time. Although suitably qualified in their own discipline area, lecturers typically have no formal teacher training (an issue currently being addressed by the Federal Government), and no specialised knowledge of teaching English to speakers of other languages. In contrast, ESL lecturers/tutors are specially trained to teach non-native speakers of English (NNS) students, and work intensively with such students in a language-skills based programme, usually within a short time-frame so as to prepare students to commence their formal studies. In addition, and unlike their subject-lecturing colleagues, they tend to work with much smaller groups (usually no more than 20). Although ESL lecturers/tutors usually operate within independent language schools, most Australian universities run pre-tertiary courses for prospective NNS students to enable them to prepare for mainstream studies. They therefore form an important bridge for international students and their mainstream studies. However, while such courses provide a useful introduction to university study and address a range of basic English/academic skills, studies have consistently shown that students whose first language is not English will need ongoing support with a range of language-related skills for the duration of their studies. The purpose of the current study is to explore the particular aspects of support that are required, especially with regard to oral language needs.

## Needs Analysis

One practical way of identifying specific English language needs is to gather data through needs analysis. The advantage of this method is that it is context-specific and therefore best suited to the needs of a particular group. In addition, needs analysis is most effective when it draws on the information provided by both students and lecturers as informants as in this way a more comprehensive picture can be provided. Previous studies have shown that students and instructors do not always identify the same problems as needing attention, nor are either group necessarily able to pinpoint the reasons for the problems they do identify.

Until recently, needs analyses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have focused on more general academic literacy skills, while needs analysis on academic aural/oral skills was “virtually nonexistent” (Ferris 1998, p. 291). This notion is supported by Flowerdew (1995, p.1) in his introduction to a collection of papers on research conducted by various authors on the theme of ‘academic listening’. In particular, he identified the need to investigate the importance of pronunciation, oral participation in small and large group discussions, different lecturing styles and format, and general listening comprehension for successful participation in tertiary courses. A recent publication by Flowerdew and Miller (2005) contrasts the focus of earlier research in second language listening, where the skill was taught in isolation with the emphasis on the product, with more recent studies which emphasise the need to encompass a range of dimensions (including cultural, social and affective) that provide a more comprehensive approach, with the emphasis on the process.

These suggestions by Flowerdew are also borne out by the results of a study conducted by Ostler (1980) in which she surveyed the academic needs of 131 ESL students enrolled at the University of Southern California about the relative importance of various academic tasks across the four macro-skill areas (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Although these four areas were surveyed, Ostler concluded that the ESL university students in general needed most help in developing academic speaking abilities (for example, talking to lecturers).

In contrast when Johns (1981) surveyed 140 subject-matter faculty at San Diego State University he discovered that faculty respondents ranked the receptive skills of reading and listening higher than the productive skills of writing and speaking, in terms of needs. However, subsequent studies have identified both listening comprehension and speaking as areas of 'need'. This includes the areas of general listening and more specifically listening to lectures, as well as the oral skills needed to take part in discussions, or to communicate with students and lecturers. One study to reach such a conclusion was that carried out by Ferris at California State University. Ferris (1998) conducted a comparative needs analysis study on students' views of academic aural/oral skills by administering a survey of 768 ESL students at three tertiary campuses, asking their views about:

their college instructors' requirements regarding listening and speaking skills, their own difficulties in meeting those requirements, and the relative importance of seven selected academic aural/oral skills or tasks. A subsample ( $n = 476$ ) of the students' survey responses was then compared with those of 206 instructors at the same institution to assess the degree of agreement between the two groups of informants. (Ferris, 1998, p. 289)

One theme that emerged consistently in Ferris's study was that the students lacked confidence related to their listening abilities, their fluency, and/or their pronunciation. For the students, lack of participation was found to be due to lack of confidence in their ability to be understood, while this lack of participation was a problem for the lecturers concerned.

Students appeared convinced that they could not understand their instructors, that their native-English speaking peers were irritated by them and that their own speech was unintelligible. Professors, in contrast, were certain that students avoided classroom interaction because of cultural inhibitions. (Ferris, 1998, pp. 310-311)

Ferris's work led her to believe that instructors are not always accurately able to identify specific areas of difficulty, nor can they tell why these areas are problematic. Conversely, the students are not always the most accurate informants on what professors actually require. She therefore stressed the need to use both student and faculty informants when looking at the needs and difficulties of ESL students in various academic settings. This would help to provide a well-rounded picture of the academic needs of those students whose first language is not English.

Present day funding and resource constraints has put pressure on pre-tertiary courses to focus on those skills deemed to be the most needed (in particular reading and writing), and as a consequence students frequently find that they do not have enough opportunity to practise speaking and listening. As a result some enter their mainstream courses ill-prepared to cope with the aural/oral demands made of them.

Jordan (2002) in Farr (2003, p.67) 'cites studies which empirically conclude that the initial difficulties students encounter in the L2 academic environment are primarily in the domains of listening and speaking'. Furthermore, Flowerdew and Miller (2005) emphasise the growing need for international citizens who are able to understand a range of varieties of English spoken around the world.

The current study is informed by those studies that have explored the various listening and speaking language needs of NNS students in English-medium universities. In particular it extends the work of Ferris, who after extensive investigation with students and lecturers, concluded that "ESL students could benefit from increased attention to academic aural/oral skills development prior to (or at least concurrent with) taking subject-matter courses" (Ferris, 1998, p. 314). Thus this study is driven by the need to identify those specific aural/oral language needs from the perspective of lecturers and students involved in the English Language Bridging Course at Curtin University of Technology. As indicated by previous research these needs may include: difficulty with general listening comprehension, poor levels of oral participation, unrealistic lecturer expectations, and, differences in lecturing format and styles.

### **Difficulty with General Listening Comprehension**

In the series of studies carried out by Ferris and Tagg in 1996 and 1998, one area of agreement reported by both instructors and students was the relative importance of general listening comprehension skills (beyond formal lectures) for success in academic settings (Ferris, 1998, p. 309). Both groups also agreed that the need for interaction in whole class groups was becoming more important, and that ESL students needed more opportunity to practise discussion in such settings so that they could develop the skills necessary to participate in such contexts (for instance, asking for clarification or repetition).

### **Poor Levels of Oral Participation**

Tertiary students are increasingly required to participate orally in lectures and seminars as part of their academic work. Mason (1995) found that there is a necessity for students to participate orally in various ways in the lecture, and noted the importance of increasing expectations of students to take part in discussions, to provide oral reports, and, generally to participate in a range of activities. This is challenging enough for NNS students in the traditional 'chalk and talk' format, but their processing skills are frequently tested beyond this when they are expected to report and discuss issues in the seminars. Furthermore, this participation requires a certain level of comprehension of the input matter in the first place so that they can formulate a response. Thompson (2003) highlights the need for lecturers to help their listeners to process information efficiently, while Farr (2003) explores the concept of 'listenership' and suggests how such listenership devices can be used effectively by L2 listeners. Failure to either process the input, or to respond appropriately can affect their marks and can result in confusion, frustration and even alienation. Therefore, it is important to make sure that international students are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully participate orally in class. This study will attempt to identify those skills from the perspective of both students and ESL lecturers, so that they can be integrated into future courses.

### **Unrealistic Lecturer Expectations**

Faculty lecturers often assume that international students are fully equipped with the necessary English skills needed to cope with their course (Ferris & Tagg, 1996a) on admission, and therefore they do not always take responsibility for accommodating student needs in this regard. In such cases, the ability to cope cannot be measured by simply achieving a minimum score on an English language test, but extends much further, and becomes a much more complex and long-term issue.

Subject lecturers also tend to make assumptions about the degree to which students are informed about their course requirements. In addition to the language difficulties, international students typically come from different cultural and academic environments, and therefore need to be made fully aware of what is expected of them, for example in terms of assessment, class participation and assignments. With regard to a description of

academic aural/oral needs, Ferris and Tagg (1996b, p. 32) found that faculty expectations were “implicit, not always clear to the students and perhaps not even apparent to the instructors themselves”. Because such requirements tend to vary from course to course and from discipline to discipline, they need to be clearly articulated from the beginning of the course, for example by providing comprehensive unit outlines. This should be presented in a way that can be easily understood by students of varying language backgrounds.

### **Differences in Lecturing Format and Styles**

The lecture format, quality and style of delivery have a profound effect on the overall level of comprehension for overseas students. Not only are they trying to take meaningful notes and to link the content with other course material provided in, for example, textbooks, but they are grappling with a range of other linguistic and socio-cultural factors which may seriously affect their understanding. To compound the problem, this input is all being processed in ‘real time’.

In a study of lecture comprehension strategies of 26 foreign graduate students studying in an English –medium environment for the first time, Mason (1995, p. 204) found that lecture comprehension problems could be identified on a range of levels; processing the lecturer’s manner of speaking, accommodating a new educational system, and adjusting to unfamiliar lecture formats. Students from different cultural backgrounds can be intimidated by the large group format, and in another study expressed a preference for working in small groups (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000). Therefore, overseas students tend to prefer the tutorial sessions to the large lectures as they find it easier to question and check for understanding.

Whilst Ferris (1998) found that students and professors agreed that it is essential for the skill of note-taking to be mastered, the processing required to understand lectures created special problems for NNS students. Specifically, they needed strategies for coping with the various lecturing styles of mainstream lecturers. Ferris found that some instructors “unlike EAP lecturers, mumble, talk quickly, do not provide visuals, and use inaccessible vocabulary or slang” (Ferris, 1998, p. 310). In addition, students are often confused by lecturers who use mostly local references and who do not use the appropriate devices to signal changes in topic or focus.

These findings, taken from a range of studies, suggest that for international students there are a number of needs. While some of these studies have included large sample sizes, others have included a smaller cohort of participants. Therefore it is unclear how representative such findings are for all students, particularly as they come from diverse backgrounds and study in a range of situations. Thus there is a need for institutions enrolling international students to conduct their own needs analysis so that the content of ESL/pre-tertiary courses can be appropriately fine-tuned on a regular basis to suit the specific difficulties faced by their current students. By doing so, institutions can assist their students to gain maximum benefit from their tertiary studies. It is the aim of the current study to embark on such an undertaking for students involved in Curtin University's English Language Bridging Course.

### **Overview**

This small-scale study is a replication of Ferris's (1998) study, amended to suit the local context. The major difference, apart from its scale, was that both the students and the lecturers involved were only engaged in ESL classes (as opposed to mainstream, as occurred in Ferris's study). The purpose of these ESL classes is to prepare students for their future studies. Ostler (1980) asserts that (in the American context) "Good ESL programs must be able to produce students who can use the same skills as their American counterparts. For this reason, assessments of the students' requirements and abilities are not just useful – they are necessary" (p. 501). The same applies in the Australian context where international students are often inappropriately deemed to be adequately prepared by virtue of being admitted onto their chosen course of study.

The students in the current study were all studying in one single class, one of five which comprised the English Language Bridging Course at Curtin University, in Semester 1, 2002. The overall aim of this course was to prepare these students for their mainstream studies.

While the students at ELBC are typically divided into discrete classes for the duration of the one-semester course, all classes undertake the same four units concurrently. Further, as all students accepted into this course have already completed a tertiary degree in their own country, they are not streamed according to ability, first language or intended discipline of study. The course is generally offered full-time, although occasionally



permanent resident students are given the opportunity to undertake it part-time. It is generally accepted that because it is very intensive a great level of commitment is needed both on the part of the student and the lecturers, with continuous assessments, long-term projects and final exams. With such a tight schedule, it is imperative to make sure that only the most suitable and beneficial activities for the students' needs are retained in the course. With a diverse student clientele, the curriculum must be constantly fine-tuned, taking into account all the participants. While student evaluations traditionally present some conflicting views, both with each other and with those of their lecturers, some general patterns do emerge, and certainly have a bearing on the future planning of the course. In any event, it is only fair to take into account the input from both sides in the hopes of attaining a balanced view, and this approach was also applied in the current needs analysis study. To do so, an amended version of Ferris's (1998) study (see Appendix) was administered to a group of 18 students and seven (ESL) lecturers. The three questions that guided the research project were as follows:

1. What are the perceived needs and difficulties of English Language Bridging Course students in terms of their speaking and listening skills?
2. What are the perceived needs and difficulties of these students from their lecturers' point of view?
3. To what extent do these perceptions concur?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

A total of 18 students completed a four-part survey which was administered only to that class taught by the researcher. It was hoped that by explaining that the results would be used to help inform future planning of the course, they would provide honest answers to the best of their ability. The age range of the students was from 17 to 40, and the average age was 27. Nine of the students were male, and nine female. Most had completed undergraduate courses in their own countries, one had completed a PhD, and another a Masters degree. These degrees included those from the disciplines of Business, Law, Economics, Finance, History, Commerce and Mass Communication. Although five were permanent residents and 13 were international students, most had been in Australia less than 12 months.

### ***Procedure***

The survey was accompanied by a statement of consent stating the purpose of the research, and it was clearly explained to the students that their participation was entirely voluntary. The teacher/researcher left the room while the survey was being completed.

In addition to the student informants, eight (ESL) lecturers from that course (English Language Bridging Course) completed Sections C and D of the survey, the former relating to their perceived ranking of listening/speaking skills, and the latter providing space for additional comments.

### **Instrument**

The survey (see Appendix) was amended from Ferris's (1998) study. It consisted of four parts; Part A dealt with demographic information relating to the students. One item was added from the version used by Ferris, namely, Question 9, asking if the students had attended school in Australia. This was included mainly to ascertain whether or not they had become familiar with the education system here. While many would have been learning English for some time, the method of instruction would have been quite different if undertaken overseas. It was anticipated that their difficulties in listening/speaking may be related to the ways in which activities are undertaken and the level of participation expected of these students in the current setting. Part B of the survey related to their perceptions of the types of aural/oral skills required in carrying out their coursework. Part C required the students to rank seven specific aural/oral skills in order of importance, and Part D provided space to add any further comments they wished.

### **Findings**

#### ***Students' Responses***

The first part (A) of the survey gave the demographic background of the students, which contributed to the overall picture of the scope of the student body for the English Language Bridging Course. The results of Part A are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Demographic Profile of Students (N=18)*

Country of origin	n	First language	n
China	4	Chinese <sup>3</sup>	5
Thailand	3	Indonesian	3
Indonesia	3	Arabic	3
Malaysia	2	Thai	3
Somalia	1	Amharic	1
Ethiopia	1	Somali	1
Eritrea	1	Japanese	1
Japan	1	Mandarin	1
Libya	1		
South. Korea	1		

The demographic information provided by the students also indicated that many of them had been learning English for several years. However, most of them indicated that they had been in Australia less than 12 months, and as a consequence they still may be struggling with accents, slang and local references. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most overseas students who take this course do not live with English speakers (in fact, one student indicated in another section of the questionnaire that her English had greatly improved when she went to live with a host family). Furthermore, many admitted that they do not read local newspapers, listen to the radio or follow the news on TV, all of which would not only enhance their general listening skills, but could also provide a context on which to base at least some of the content they are required to process. This information could be very useful in orientation sessions for forthcoming groups.

One question included in this section of the questionnaire that had not been part of Ferris’s (1998) study was Question 9 (Have you attended school in Australia?). Only ten students answered this question; six of these indicated ‘yes’ and four indicated ‘no’. While

<sup>3</sup> First language as reported by the students; this could include any one of a number of dialects.

this was intended to refer to the formal schooling system, overseas students often refer to any English language course as ‘school’. Nonetheless, more than half of those who did respond, had attended classes in Australia before commencing the Bridging Course. Since many Bridging Course students first attend an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) class, it is most likely that this is what they were referring to. As this was a simple closed question, no further information was available regarding their experience with the educational system in Australia.

The second part (B) was designed to ascertain the kinds of skills undertaken in class. While this was originally aimed at finding out what was needed in mainstream courses, the current study merely sought to find out which skills the students actually used in their (ESL) course. To do this they were required to provide responses to the question: In your current class, do you...? The results of Part B are presented in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Types of Skills Required*

	Always	sometimes	never
11. Participate in small group work	8	10	0
12. Ask the teacher questions	3	14	1
13. Discuss assignments with classmates	6	11	1
14. Complete homework without help from others.	15	3	0

In response to this section, all of the students indicated that they participate in small group work, either ‘always’ or ‘sometimes’. When asked whether or not they ask the teacher questions, all but one indicated that they do so, but most of them only asked the teacher questions ‘sometimes’. When asked whether they discuss assignments with classmates, once again, all but one indicated that they do so, with six indicating that they ‘always’ do so, and 11 indicating ‘sometimes’. For the final question of this section, asking whether students complete homework without help from others, it seems that the students may have indicated answers that they thought were appropriate. Very few students admitted to asking others for help when completing homework, when in fact they are

actively encouraged to use peer support, and from anecdotal evidence seemed to frequently engage in such a practice. This of course is a limitation of this particular section of the survey, which should be treated with caution.

In Parts C and D the trends that emerged regarding the aural/oral needs of the students in the study are outlined with particular reference to the students' and lecturers' perceptions about the level of importance of certain listening/speaking skills. First, the results of the students' responses to Part C are presented (see Table 4 below). Because correlational analysis requires a minimum of 30 subjects (Locke, Silverman & Spirduso, 1998, p. 165) with such a small number of respondents, such analysis was not undertaken in the current study. Instead simple tables are used to present the data and indicate the findings. The students were given a list of 7 listening/speaking skills, and were asked to rank each one in order of importance relative to the others, with a ranking of 1 being the most important. The ranking and relative importance of each skill is represented by a cross in the grid. For example, Table 4 indicates that most of the students ranked the pronunciation of English with a 1, 2, or 3, and therefore regarded it as being very important in relation to the other skills.

Table 4

*Listening/Speaking Skills Ranked in Order of Importance – Students<sup>4</sup>*

	1 <sup>a</sup>	2	3	4	5	6	7
a. Pronunciation of English	XXXXXX	XXXX	XXX		X	X	X
b. Lecture note-taking	X	XXX	X	XX	XXXX	XXX	X
c. General listening comprehension	XXXXXX	XXX		XX	XX	XXX	
d. Ability to give presentations	X	X	X	XXXXX	XXX	XX	XX
e. Ability to participate effectively in class discussions	X	X	XX	X	XXX	XXX	XXXX
f. Ability to communicate effectively with other students in small group discussions, projects or out-of-class study groups	X	X	XXXXX	X	XXX	X	XX
g. Ability to communicate effectively with lecturers in or out of class	X	XX	XXX	XXX		X	XXXX
Other (please describe)							

Students' responses (N=18)

<sup>a</sup> 1 = most important, 7 = least important

Firstly, the students surveyed seemed in agreement that general listening comprehension and pronunciation (in that order) were high on the list of important skills; there also seemed to be agreement that the ability to participate effectively in class discussions (as opposed to small group discussions) and the ability to communicate effectively with lecturers were not as important. The ability to give presentations tended to rank low on the list, while there was a full range of responses for lecture note-taking.

For the most part, classes on the Bridging Course are scheduled for class groups of approximately 20, with full-group lectures taking place on average once or twice a week. At this point in the course the students had not yet attended many large lectures, nor had they been required to do their formal presentations. Judging from the responses presented, it would seem that at this stage, they were merely grappling with the need to understand and to be understood. This would be consistent with problems associated with most international students in the early stages of their studies in the host country.

Only three students listed additional skills in the 'Other' section. These were:

<sup>4</sup> The x mark indicates the priority (1-7) given by the student for that particular skill (a-g)

1. 'Ability to speak in Western way'.
2. 'Ability to understand lecture'.
3. 'Ability to communicate with people in real life (not only in or out of class)'.

Although the students involved in the current study were asked to act as volunteers, some may have felt obliged to help by providing information. As a consequence, they may have only provided the bare minimum response required, when it would be most useful from the researcher's point of view to obtain additional information, such as in the 'Other' section above. Alternatively, they may lack the linguistic skills or the knowledge to identify their specific needs at this stage of their studies, and may not be in a good position to explain exactly what they thought they needed. It is always prudent to treat such information with caution, as students are not always the best judges of what they need, and it may be the case that they write what they think the reader would like to read. In addition, there is always the tension between asking for volunteers (who may typically fall into a certain category) and getting very few respondents, and 'imposing' a task on a group for the sake of getting some substantial data in return. Even so, the comments in this section seem to indicate that in terms of listening and speaking skills the respondents provided answers that related to their immediate need to communicate, to understand what is going on around them and to be understood. In other words, general speaking and listening skills were listed as a greater priority than the more academic skills (i.e., what they would need later in this course or in their mainstream course).

In Section D, relating to listening/speaking requirements in their classes or about their own problems with the activities, approximately half of the students provided additional comments. These have been divided into four categories, vocabulary, pronunciation, general communication skills, and, facilities. A discussion of these is presented below.

### **i) Vocabulary**

Two students stressed the importance of improving vocabulary in terms of communicating with other people, and the necessity to provide the opportunity to increase

their vocabulary (as it stands, vocabulary is only dealt with formally in the Tertiary Studies Skills module).

## **ii) Pronunciation**

Two students indicated the need to be provided with practice opportunity especially in relation to pronunciation; one in particular expressed embarrassment and frustration when people could not understand her. This concurred with the findings of Ferris, 1998, however, it should also be noted that this problem generally seems to cause more angst to the students themselves than to the lecturers. In addition, one student had difficulty in understanding 'Australian pronunciation' and felt that it took some time to get used to different accents. Another student felt that listening and speaking were more important than reading and writing, and that exposure to the English language outside class was very important, adding that her English improved greatly when she went to live with a local family.

## **iii) General communication skills**

Three students said that they needed more listening and speaking practice in general, and one said that she needed the listening/speaking skills to be able to interact with others in a group situation.

## **iv) Facilities**

Two students felt that more facilities were needed; for instance, one suggested the use of a language laboratory.

### ***Lecturers' Responses***

Parts C and D of the survey were then distributed to the 8 lecturers on the Bridging Course who regularly taught the English Communication module, which dealt specifically with aural/oral skills. One lecturer failed to complete Part C correctly, giving each area a rating from 1 to 7, rather than ranking in order of importance. His survey therefore had to be eliminated, leaving responses from 7 lecturers. These are presented below in Table 5.



Table 5

*Listening/Speaking Skills Ranked in Order of Importance - Lecturers*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
a. Pronunciation of English	X	X		X		X	X
b. Lecture note-taking	X			X		X	XXX
c. General listening comprehension	XX	XX	X		X		
d. Ability to give presentations		X	X		XX	XXX	
e. Ability to participate effectively in class discussions	X		XXX	X	X		
f. Ability to communicate effectively with other students in small group discussions, projects or out-of-class study groups	X	X	X	XX			
g. Ability to communicate effectively with lecturers in or out of class	X			X	X	XX	X
Other (please describe)							

Lecturers' responses (N=7)

<sup>a</sup> 1 = most important, 7 = least important

With such a small number of respondents, it was difficult to trace any pattern within the group itself. Overall the ESL lecturers seemed to indicate support for the relative importance of general listening comprehension, the ability to participate effectively in class discussions, and the ability to communicate effectively with other students, as compared with taking lecture notes and giving presentations. However, the lecturers were divided as to the importance of pronunciation.

Only one lecturer in the current study provided additional information in the space provided, indicating that using correct intonation patterns was important for overall comprehensibility, more so than correct pronunciation of individual sounds. This suggestion reflects an observation made by Ferris (1998), namely that lecturing staff are more concerned about students making an attempt to participate in class, even if they feel their pronunciation is not perfect. Students, on the other hand are reluctant to take part if they feel that their pronunciation is not native-like.

### ***Comparison Between Students and Lecturers***

According to the information gleaned from the current small-scale study, while individual students expressed specific needs in some cases, the lecturers and students generally agreed that in the area of listening and speaking skills, students need more practice in general listening comprehension. This concurred with the findings of Ferris's (1998) study. In an effort to prepare our students for an academic setting, it could be that this area has been overlooked or perhaps taken for granted. The apparent reluctance of many NNS students to participate in class discussions may well be related to the fact that they are worried about poor pronunciation, a factor which appears to be seen by lecturers as secondary to the need to attempt to communicate orally. However, it may also be due to the fact that they are struggling to understand what is going on around them. This problem could be remedied by providing them with strategies to cope, such as identifying main points, and asking instructors or peers for clarification or repetition. Furthermore, the responses of both lecturers and students indicated that it was more important for them to communicate with other students than with the lecturers. This could be because they see the need to communicate with fellow students as being more immediate, certainly in a preparation course such as this one, where they are still coming to terms with their new surroundings.

### **Conclusion**

It appears then that those planning English language intensive courses need to be mindful of the specific listening and speaking difficulties faced by students from diverse language backgrounds. One effective way to ascertain this is by conducting a needs analysis which involves both student and lecturer informants. In this way, a balanced view may be obtained, as students and lecturers do not always identify the same problem areas. In this study one area of agreement between the two groups is in the importance attributed to general listening skills in lectures, tutorials and group assignments. The reason for this may be because increased listening comprehension is believed to encourage more successful participation in small and large group discussions, which are becoming increasingly common in academic settings.

## **Implications**

The aim of the current study was to determine the needs of a particular group of students so that their cumulative needs could be addressed when planning future courses. While this was attained, the outcomes also provided useful information for the English Language Bridging Course, which aims to provide a vital link between potential students and their mainstream courses. Similarly to the findings of Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000) it appears that NNS students in a variety of disciplines face a number of difficulties because they are still developing English proficiency in the areas of speaking and listening. This is exacerbated by lecturers who do not articulate clearly enough to be easily understood, or who use references or terminology with which those students may not yet be familiar. Conversely, international students need to be aware of the range of delivery styles of mainstream lecturers in this respect, and be taught strategies to deal with them.

From the point of view of pathway courses (which typically fall into the large class group category), the students need to be given practice in dealing with large lectures. Perhaps the findings of this and other studies will go some way towards informing those involved with future curriculum planning for the English Language Bridging Course.

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## Appendix

### *Survey: Listening and speaking skills for ESL/EFL students*

#### **A. About yourself**

1. Your country of origin \_\_\_\_\_
2. First language \_\_\_\_\_
3. Gender:
  - ☐ Male
  - ☐ Female
4. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Name of degree course completed in your country \_\_\_\_\_
6. Name and level (undergraduate or postgraduate) of intended degree course in Australia \_\_\_\_\_
7. How long have you been in Australia? \_\_\_\_\_
8. How long have you been learning English? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Have you attended school in Australia?
10. Are you a/n
  - ☐ Permanent resident
  - ☐ International student

#### **B. In your current class:**

Do you...? (for each question, choose one of the following three options)

*always      sometimes      never*

11. Participate in small group work
12. Ask the teacher questions
13. Discuss assignments with classmates
14. Complete homework without help from others

**C. Listening/speaking skills**

Please rank all skills below from 1 to 7 in order of importance (1=most important)

- \_\_\_ a. pronunciation of English
- \_\_\_ b. lecture note-taking
- \_\_\_ c. general listening comprehension (other than formal lectures)
- \_\_\_ d. ability to give presentations
- \_\_\_ e. ability to participate effectively in class discussions
- \_\_\_ f. ability to communicate effectively with other students in  
small-group discussions, projects, or out-of-class study groups.
- \_\_\_ g. ability to communicate effectively with lecturers in or out of  
class.
- \_\_\_ other (please describe):

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**D. Other comments**

If you have any comments about listening or speaking requirements in your university classes or about your own problems with these activities, please write them here.

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## **LINKING COMMENTARY: PAPER 4 TO PAPER 5**

This investigation into the English Language Bridging Course students' listening and speaking needs was undertaken because less is known about these macroskills than those of reading and writing. While all students commencing the ELBC have studied English in their own countries (some for many years), most report having had very little opportunity to practise listening and speaking in English. In addition, they may have learned American or other varieties of English, and may be unaccustomed to Australian accents when they first arrive. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that even when they arrive in Australia, they do not live with speakers of English, and have minimal time to access newspapers, television and radio to help them with the language. As a result, their shortcomings in listening and speaking are very obvious, and they often mistakenly believe that a one-semester English course, such as the ELBC, will solve their problems in this regard. It is apparent from this investigation that the students do indeed need as much practice as possible, and certainly they learn a number of important skills, such as listening and note-taking and doing formal oral presentations during the course.

If the purpose of the ELBC is to prepare these students for their ongoing studies, then it is important to capture the students' voices in order to find the extent to which they feel the ELBC has prepared them for their studies. In order to do this, the first step was to call for volunteers from one particular cohort to talk about the ways in which the ELBC had helped them with their English language/academic skills. Thirteen students, representing a range of language and cultural backgrounds were interviewed immediately after completing the course. Paper 5 reports the results of this round of interviews. The students were asked to offer their impressions of how the course helped to prepare them for their mainstream studies. While they anticipated having to spend a lot of time learning the mechanics of the English language, they were surprised to find that the course offered useful language-based academic skills, such as writing extended essays and learning how to reference correctly. In particular, they realised during the course that they needed a lot more speaking and listening practice, and that this could not be acquired simply by attending all the class sessions. The ELBC also played an important role in helping these students to make the transition to a new academic and social environment.

## **PAPER 5**

### **GLOBALISATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BODY**

#### **Abstract**

Globalisation is affecting many aspects of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Globally, English is becoming more and more important as a lingua franca for trade, commerce and the transfer of information. At the same time, increasing numbers of students are availing themselves of the opportunity to study abroad. For many students whose first language is not English, acquiring a degree from an English-speaking country offers better employment opportunities when they return to their home country. As a result, Australian universities are processing growing numbers of applications from international students. Those students who fully meet minimum admissions requirements may proceed directly onto their mainstream course, while those who meet all the academic requirements other than English proficiency may undertake a pathway course to augment their language skills. A group of thirteen international students were interviewed after completing the English Language Bridging Course (ELBC) at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. The purpose of the study was to find out more about their impressions of the course post facto. The interviews provide a useful insight into the problems of adjusting to a new cultural and academic environment, and the role that is played by the ELBC in preparing them for their mainstream studies.

#### **Introduction**

During the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the scene was set for a new type of world, one where people were travelling more, learning more about each other, and taking advantage of greater possibilities to share each others' assets. Globalisation has provided ever-increasing opportunities for both developing and developed countries to exchange technology, knowledge, skills, goods and services. This has resulted in cultural interchange, more opportunities to travel, and access to previously inaccessible routes for trade, both in the physical sense and beyond. Singer (2002) describes how the isolation of distance has dwindled over the centuries, but with increasing rapidity in the last few years,



indicating that “now people living on opposite sides of the world are linked in ways previously unimaginable” (p. 11). He also quotes Marx’s claim that technology changes everything, and goes on to affirm that as technology has overcome distance, economic globalisation has followed.

The rise of a ‘neo-liberal’ global economy is based on the ideology that if everyone pursues their own self-interest, the world will be a better place for all. The result has been the growth of a western capitalist approach, characterised by a trend to encourage open markets (not impeded by government regulations), free movement of capital, free trade and a highly competitive global marketplace. Yano (2001, p. 119) asserts that “....economic globalisation is controlled by the U.S.-type market principle of the fittest survives in free competition.”

### **The Global Economy and Education**

Education has traditionally held its value in most cultures as a precious asset, but it is only in the past 20 years or so that it has come to be seen as a viable and indeed, marketable product. Simultaneously, the increasing use of English throughout the world, seen by many as “an inevitable consequence of economic globalisation” (Graddol & Meinhof, 1999, p. 1) has helped to create an unprecedented demand for university places in various parts of the English-speaking world. Larsen and Vincent-Lancrin (2003) reported that:

international student mobility to OECD countries has doubled over the past 20 years. Between 1995 and 1999 the number of foreign students rose almost twice as fast as the total number of tertiary-level students in OECD countries (9% for the former as against 5% for the latter).

In most cases, this has inevitably meant students from NNS (non-native speaking) backgrounds have been applying for places in universities where English is the medium of instruction.

Australia is one popular destination for international students in higher education, and a large portion of these students come from South-East Asia. These students are willing and able to invest in an overseas education, and Australia has responded to their needs. Seddon and Marginson (2001, p. 209) noted that “most of these students pay full

fees, ensuring that Australia's global educational relationships are centred on affluent families particularly from Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia (which provide most of the international students studying in Australia)". Australia's position in the Asia-Pacific region is seen as a strategic asset in the wake of 'clever country' reforms initiated by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of the 1980s. During that era the focus was on a "global agenda, linking education and training into the Commonwealth's overall economic policy thrust" (Seddon & Marginson, 2001, p. 205). The success of this focus is demonstrated by the fact that currently, there are some 127,191 overseas students studying onshore in Australia, representing an annual growth of 11% (IDP Education Australia, 2004). This is one way in which globalisation has changed the face of tertiary education.

According to a 'growth scenario' put forward by International Development Programs (IDP), it is predicted that the number of "onshore international students could rise to more than 850,000 by 2025, representing a compound annual increase of 10 percent" (IDP Education Australia, 2003). Education is therefore becoming a globally marketable commodity; furthermore, universities in places like Australia and New Zealand are competing fiercely for their share of the market. Although Australia's share of the global demand for international higher education is predicted to grow, recent research conducted by IDP suggests that the current trend would only continue under certain conditions, one of these being quality of education, and therefore this must be assured.

Overseas students who seek places in English medium universities are generally known as 'international students', and their applications are assessed under separate entry criteria to those of local students. The majority pay full tuition fees, as opposed to the local students, who are eligible for subsidised places. From the point of view of prospective international students, the process of applying for a place in university abroad involves serious decisions, including amongst other things, temporarily moving overseas for a minimum period of two years, during which they may complete either an undergraduate or a postgraduate degree. Many of these discerning students base their choice of institution on word of mouth from friends and family members. Therefore the reputation of an institution is an important consideration, but once the decision has been made, there are considerable financial implications.

From the perspective of the receiving institutions, that is those universities that are enrolling those international students at a time when funding is an important global issue

(Altbach & Davis, 1999), they provide much-needed revenue. For example, in Australia the increasing demand for full-fee paying places by overseas students is often seen as a welcome solution to the crisis created by dwindling funds made available for government universities. In this context, globalisation has provided a ripe and lucrative market for cash-strapped universities, and for the economy in general.

International education contributes \$5.9 billion to the Australian economy without taking into account living expenses and money spent by visiting relatives, which has been estimated at about \$2.5 billion. International student fees make up approximately 14 per cent, or \$1.7 billion, of total university revenue in Australia and international students constitute about 25 percent of the total student population. (Tater, 2005, p. 42)

With respect to the overseas students, given that most plan to return to their own countries upon completion of their studies, the value of obtaining a degree from an English-speaking country can be estimated on two levels: firstly, it is often beneficial for those working in specialist fields to be able to acquire knowledge and skills overseas. These skills can then be used upon their return to their home countries to further the development of specific fields. Secondly, it may be valuable in terms of an opportunity to learn English, a means of global communication, or a global lingua franca, seen as an essential tool for the communication of knowledge, the conduct of business and the exchange of skills among the global community, regardless of first language. Furthermore, English is now the language of international communication, having official status in 60 countries and a prominent place in 20 more (Johnson, 1996). It has also “assumed a role as the primary international language of science and scholarship, including the Internet” (Altbach & Davis, 1999, p. 1). The importance of this is that proficiency in English is fundamental to participating in our global community. As Volet and Ang (1998, p. 6) note “Global education implies preparing students for global citizenship”.

There is also a social benefit stemming from the participation of international students in Australian universities. This educational globalisation, conducted through the medium of English, can enhance development and as a consequence lead to global prosperity. In fact, in 2003 Lindy Hyam, the then Chief Executive of International Development Programs (IDP) Education Australia, Australia’s leading international education and development organisation, asserted that “those in leadership roles in the international education industry around the world had a responsibility to ensure that the

benefits of international education flowed to all countries – both developed and developing” (IDP Education Australia 2003, p. 1). This is particularly the case for developing countries in that they can be offered a share of the spoils. Further, these spoils often come through the channel of English language mastery. As Graddol and Meinhof suggest, “Proficiency in English is regarded by many as a gateway to economic improvement – both at an individual level as well as that of nation-states” (Graddol & Meinhof, 1999, p. 1).

The globalisation of education occurs not only through onshore degrees, but more and more opportunities are also being made available for students to study offshore, or in their home countries. With the benefits of modern technology, these students are now in a position to study through e-learning, which now accounts for a substantial proportion of overseas students. “ ....between 1996 and 2001, such offshore enrolments increased from 24% to 37% of all international students enrolled in Australian institutions” (Larsen and Vincent-Lancrin, 2003). Whether students study offshore or onshore, however, there is no doubt that great importance is given to an overseas qualification from an English-speaking country.

The phenomenal increase in applications for places in Australian universities alone suggests that a degree undertaken in the English language is given great status, particularly in South-East Asia, and so this region is the source of most Australia-bound students. However, new markets are emerging and there are increasing numbers of students coming from Africa and the Middle East, many of whom are scholarship recipients, and the global market is rapidly expanding. In the case of the former, the opportunity to study abroad is a welcome solution to a serious lack of access to tertiary education and generally a “dramatic decline in academic conditions in sub-Saharan Africa and in some other developing countries” (Altbach & Davis, 1999, p. 2).

With these new markets come new issues and problems to resolve. For instance, students coming from the African continent frequently report having little or no computer knowledge or experience (Taylor, Jamieson & Eignor, 2000). Such skills are essential if they are to function in a global tertiary institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Further, and as stated previously, access to quality tertiary education has important social consequences on a global level. Therefore it is important for developed nations to continue to offer quality educational opportunities in the interests of global prosperity.

Whether or not developing countries can actually access educational globalisation, there is no doubt that there is a strong demand for places from overseas. However, the considerations potential students must take into account must extend beyond the personal long term benefits and short term academic criteria: the decision to opt for an overseas qualification must be weighed up in terms of the investment of time and money involved.

To do this, that is to balance the costs versus the benefits, international students need to engage with one key feature of globalisation identified by Ritzer (2000), namely calculability. Thus, from the point of view of international students entering tertiary education, the concept of calculability is crucial. Time, money and grades all have to be calculated in order to achieve the desired outcome. For example, student visas are issued for a limited period of time during which attendance in class and 'satisfactory progress' must be verified at regular intervals. Assuming they have passed the prerequisite subjects, and that the required English level (score) is achieved, students may proceed to their chosen mainstream course. In the case of postgraduate students, there will be a limit on the amount of time they can take to complete their studies – there may even be related scholarship or sponsorship issues. However, if their English proficiency score is not adequate, they will need to enter an enabling course to bridge the gap between their previous learning and future studies. This puts a great deal of pressure on the students in terms of additional tuition fees and accommodations costs, the need to obtain minimum scores, the additional time taken to complete their studies, and of course, the requirement to extend visas, all of which can be very costly. Thus the decision about their future must be carefully calculated, taking into account those quantitative factors outlined above, and weighing these against qualitative considerations.

While Ritzer (2000) casts the analogy of quantity versus quality across many walks of life, he describes how the phenomenon is becoming more evident in higher education:

In education, most courses run for a standard number of weeks and hours per week. In the main, little attention is devoted to determining whether a given subject is best taught in a given number of weeks or hours per week. The focus seems to be on how many students (the 'products') can be herded through the system and what grades they earn rather than the quality of what they have learned and of the educational experience. (Ritzer, 2000, p. 66)

With current funding models and the constant pressure on Australian universities to do more with less, there is a tendency for the short-term economic gain achieved by

trimming down the time taken to complete courses to overshadow the quest for quality. Yet, in the long term, if quality is not maintained, the demand for places among overseas students will dwindle, putting more financial pressure on the universities.

Quality of education is by far the most important driver of growth in international education and Australia's market share is much more sensitive to changes in perception of quality and employment prospects, compared to the UK and USA largely because of our reliance on Asian countries as source markets. (IDP Education Australia, 2003, p. 1)

Therefore there is an ongoing tension between issues of quantity and quality.

### **English Language Proficiency**

An integral part of the process of earning the right to study in an English-medium university is the ability to communicate adequately in the English language. A range of English language tests is used to assess English language proficiency for university entry, but the most widely-accepted of these are the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). IELTS is recognised by universities in many countries, including Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Canada and the USA. In the case of IELTS, the receiving institutions set their cut-off points in each of the four macroskills: Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. This means that in addition to attaining an overall average minimum bandscore, prospective students must achieve a minimum in each of these areas to be eligible for admission. However, getting the desired minimum score on the IELTS test is only the beginning. It is commonly accepted among second language professionals that:

Learning a foreign language not only involves learning rules of pronunciation and grammar as well as new vocabulary, but includes the ability to use these linguistic resources in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate among speakers of that language. (Yano, 1995, p. 362)

In other words, students who are accepted for admission to tertiary courses on the basis of scores on an English language test may still need a lot of support if they are to function successfully in English in a tertiary institution.

A number of studies have examined the relationship between English competency as measured by the IELTS test, and subsequent academic performance (e.g. Bellingham, 1993; Dooley and Oliver, 2002; Elder, 1993; Hill, Storch and Lynch, 1999; Kerstjens and

Nery, 2000) and while it is important to establish a baseline cut-off point, it is generally agreed that language is but one of a range of factors which contribute to academic success. Even with the required English proficiency level, international students still have to grapple with a broader range of challenges within the wider context of the language (for example, coping with group work, tutorials and lectures involving a range of accents) and beyond, including the intercultural experience. The latter is a very complex issue, and receiving institutions need to be prepared to make provisions for the successful integration of overseas and local students on campus, in order to maximise their chances of success. This is important in terms of producing both local and international graduates with global understanding, skills and imagination.

### **Intercultural Communication**

It is generally accepted that intercultural communication is one of the keystones of successful business between partners of varying cultures, but the challenge is seriously put to the test on campus in the average Australian university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not only are more international students taking up places; a greater range of cultures is being represented. Aside from the English language, these students frequently encounter problems related to adjustment, such as culture shock, a term coined by Oberg (1960) and other difficulties related to cross-cultural communication, where differences in communication style, beliefs, attitudes, values and perceptions are far more subtle and less obvious than differences in language, food and appearance (Levine & Adelman, 1982). In addition, many students, for instance, those from South-East Asia, encounter specific problems relating to different styles of teaching and learning, and cultural variations in ways of thinking and in academic expression (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984). The greatest challenge in becoming adjusted to higher education in English speaking, western-style universities, according to research conducted by Myles & Cheng (2003) is:

to become acculturated into a new academic and cultural community. Graduate students, in particular, feel intense pressure to succeed because many of them have scholarships and/or jobs in their native country to which they will return. (p. 248)

Many Asian students are accustomed to a reproductive, rather than a critical approach to learning, (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997) and therefore the strategies they adopt in the early stages of dealing with assignments in Western universities may not be adequate in

delivering the required results. Many international students have a long history of success in exams (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997) and indeed the pressure to achieve high marks (both from themselves and from family) is considerable, therefore great emphasis is placed on assessment. Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan (1991) in a study conducted in a number of different faculties at three universities and one Insitute of Advanced Education in Queensland, found that Asian students would frequently ask a lecturer why they received a mark lower than expected, even though they would not normally do this in their home cultures. There is also a variation in the expectations of how students should deal with the material presented to them. On the one hand, staff in Australian universities

expect students to work independently, and at times to criticise and debate the issues they raise in class. Asian students, however, from societies and education systems much higher in power distance, adopt passive learning styles and avoid debate or criticism of the material raised in class. (Barker et al., 1991, p. 80)

While the successful integration of local and overseas students on campus has been the focus of much research to date, (Nesdale & Todd, 1993; Volet & Ang, 1998; Myles & Cheng, 2003) there are inherent challenges involved in working within culturally mixed groups, a situation which is becoming more and more common in Australian universities as the range of diverse cultures represented expands. Recent student arrivals in particular tend to form 'clusters' with their own people (Ward & Kennedy, 1993) which provides them with much-needed support in the adjustment process. However, this is frequently viewed by others as a lack of willingness to integrate. This is particularly relevant in the case of speakers of the Chinese languages/dialects, who currently make up increasing proportions of the overseas student population in Australia. Furthermore, they are more likely to revert to their own language than to speak English, which reduces the opportunity of practising the new language. This happens for two reasons; firstly, the proportion of speakers of Chinese languages is increasing, and secondly, by staying 'with their own' they can operate within what Volet and Tan-Quigley (1995) have termed their 'comfort zone'.

In summary, international students often suffer from problems related to their adjustment to a new academic and cultural environment. Therefore, the role of preparation courses is crucial, not just in terms of developing English language skills, but also in teaching students the vital skills required for successful intercultural communication.



## Overview

Many universities now offer pre-tertiary English programmes as pathways to mainstream study for international students. One example is Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia, which offers a range of English-language based preparation courses, including the English Language Bridging Course (ELBC), an “advanced academic English program that prepares students from non-English speaking backgrounds for undergraduate and postgraduate study at Curtin” (Department of Languages and Intercultural Education, Curtin University of Technology, 2005, p. 6). It is intended for students who meet all other Curtin academic entry requirements, but who have failed to reach the cut-off scores required to demonstrate English language proficiency for ‘direct entry’ into mainstream. In turn, there is a minimum entry score required for admission into the Bridging course. This is normally an overall IELTS score of 5.0, with a minimum of 5.0 on each of the modules (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking). Many students take the IELTS test in their own countries before departure to Australia. Those whose score falls well short of this required level, may be accepted into an English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) and later proceed to Bridging.

Students who achieve a pass (or, in some cases, a minimum percentage score, set by the receiving school or faculty) on the English Language Bridging Course, will automatically gain a place in their chosen mainstream course. The Bridging course is normally taken full-time over one semester, and consists of four units – Academic Writing, English Communication, English for Specific Purposes and Tertiary Studies Skills. Each unit is taught by a different lecturer, although in some cases the same lecturer might teach a class on two units, but no more. The Academic Writing unit involves a major individual assignment called the research essay, while English for Specific Purposes involves a group project which entails the design and administration of a questionnaire on a subject related to the students’ intended mainstream course, and a joint research project and group presentation as the major point of assessment for the unit. English Communication helps to develop the students’ listening and speaking skills; this includes listening and note-taking, and a formal presentation. Finally Tertiary Studies Skills focuses on vocabulary and reading skills, with particular emphasis on summarising and constructing a critical review.

During the course, the students are exposed to a range of academic skills, with a particular focus on the appropriate language for each situation. Although this course is also open to local permanent residents, the vast majority are classified as 'international students'; in other words, they plan to return to their country upon completion of their degree. It is the latter group of students who are the focus of this study. The successful completion of their courses, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, is crucial, as many have work and scholarship commitments to fulfil. To date, most of the research relating to overseas students has concentrated on their progress in mainstream, rather than pathway courses. Therefore this study focuses on the Bridging course to examine whether or not its promise to prepare these students for their mainstream studies, is being fulfilled. Specifically it seeks to explore if the course is able to effectively assess student need, taking into account their personal perceptions of studying in Australia, particularly in relation to their previous academic experience, and then to adequately address the collective needs of the students.

The university's reputation is well established in the South-East Asian region, being voted Australia's leading university of science and technology by Asiaweek, in 1998, 1999 and 2000 (Curtin University of Technology, 2002, p. 5). One area that is worthy of mention here is the increasing number of Chinese-background students attending courses at Curtin. In the Semester 2, 2003 Bridging Course intake, over 50% of the students reported their nationality as 'Chinese'. As a result, care had to be taken to distribute the Chinese evenly across the seven classes. The idea was to provide as varied a language background mix in each class as possible, to ensure maximum opportunity to speak English. The implications of this scenario will be discussed later.

The aim of the two phase study is to evaluate the degree to which Curtin is meeting the needs and expectations of international students, and to gain an understanding of their perceptions of studying in Australia, but in particular, the role and scope of the ELBC in preparing its students for their mainstream studies at Curtin. On the basis of recent research findings (see IDP Education Australian, 2003), if anticipated growth in international education is to continue, it is vital for the university to continue to be seen to deliver quality.

## **Method**

The study targeted a cohort of approximately 150 overseas students (placed randomly in seven parallel classes) studying on the ELBC in Semester 2, 2003, who were intending to enter their mainstream course (undergraduate or post-graduate) at Curtin University in Semester 1, 2004. As a first step, a questionnaire was administered to the entire group of 150 students, asking them for details about their English and educational background, and their future study plans. They were also asked to indicate how long they had been in Australia, and whether or not they had taken any English classes prior to the Bridging Course. This is normally regarded as a crucial area, as newly-arrived students typically experience difficulty in adjusting to their surroundings and this, in turn, can have a serious impact on their progress, particularly in such an intensive course. The students were also asked to rate varying skills, such as speaking, critical thinking, and working in groups, in terms of importance for their future studies.

Next, volunteers from the cohort were sought to take part in one-to-one interviews with the researcher to talk about their impressions of the Bridging Course and its effectiveness, and 13 volunteers came forward. There was to be no formal structure to the interview – this was to ensure that the researcher could be kept “as free and as open as possible to discovery and to emergence of concepts, problems and interpretations from the data” (Glaser, 1998, p. 67). Finally the questionnaire was used to ascertain the demographic details of the student sample. This information was used to determine the extent to which the sample was representative of the cohort in general.

## ***Participants***

Thirteen students (seven males and six females) ranging in age from 23 to 35 volunteered to take part in the interviews – two pairs (two males and two females) asked to be interviewed together. While the ELBC is designed for both undergraduate and postgraduate students alike, approximately 70% of most intake groups plan to undertake postgraduate studies at Curtin. Of the 13 who volunteered to be interviewed as part of this study, all but two were planning to undertake postgraduate courses after Bridging. The students came from Thailand, Brazil, Indonesia, China, Saudi Arabia, Korea and the Sudan. (A more detailed profile of the students interviewed can be found in Appendix A). Given

the range of ages, nationalities and first languages, and the gender balance, this sample is considered to be representative of the entire cohort. Each interview lasted approximately 20-25 minutes. The researcher was mindful of the fact that in the presence of one of their teachers, these students may have been reluctant to talk about the quality of the instruction; however, since this was not specifically the main focus of the study, it was hoped that these circumstances would not be an impediment for two reasons; firstly, the students were asked to choose any aspects of the course (positive or negative) to talk about, and secondly, by being volunteers only those who felt free to speak frankly about whatever areas they wished would have come forward in the first place.

### ***Procedure***

The questionnaire (see Appendix B) was administered to the entire intake of 150 students first to check for validity and reliability. Information sheets and consent forms were distributed, and students were encouraged to ask any questions before volunteering to be interviewed. Thirteen volunteers came forward, and the interviews were conducted immediately after the completion of the course, but before the exams took place. Since the purpose of the study was to estimate the perceived effectiveness of the ELBC, the students were simply asked to offer their comments about their needs and expectations in taking the course, and to say whether or not they felt it was successful in preparing them for their future studies at Curtin. Further questions were used mainly for clarification purposes. In this way it was hoped to gain an honest estimation of the course from the students' perspective. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The students were given fictitious names in order to protect their identity, but in the following sections are identified according to nationality and gender. The transcriptions were coded systematically according to emerging issues, and, where applicable, cross-referenced with the literature. Finally the themes occurring most commonly in the interviews were categorised, described and discussed.

### **Findings**

Overall the problems experienced by the students, according to their responses, can be broadly divided into four categories; English language skills, academic English skills

(for example, doing formal presentations), intercultural communication, and issues of time and cost. More specifically the following were identified as issues: having too many speakers of Chinese languages/dialects, formal presentations, group discussions, using good models, research methods, the disparity of English proficiency levels, academic English skills, transition to university life in Australia, intercultural communication, time and cost, Information Communication Technology (ICT), critical thinking, unrealistic student expectations, and, the usefulness of the qualifications obtained. However, the most urgent need from the students' perspective was to improve their English language skills in the most efficient way possible, to enable them to cope with their assigned tasks. The students' comments and relevant comments from the literature are summarised and presented in the discussion that follows.

### *Chinese Speakers*

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese students seeking places in tertiary institutions in Australia, and such is the case at Curtin University. Like students from other destinations, many of these need to attend pathway courses and/or to improve their English language proficiency before commencing their mainstream courses. The proportion of students who spoke a Chinese language caused some problems for this particular cohort, and given the existing proportions, each class had to have a substantial number of Chinese speakers. This is one area that caused the greatest concern among the interviewees, particularly in relation to group work.

Several students commented that the Chinese tended not only to team up together for group discussion, but to speak in their own language when working together. This caused enormous problems in the ESP unit, where students were grouped to work on a joint project according to their intended mainstream course.

*as we can see the majority of students come from one country – China, and they usually hang around together in you know, small clusters, and the end up like speaking their own language...(Andy, Brazilian male)*

When asked if there should be more speaking practice, several students commented on the lack of opportunity to speak English, not just in informal discussions in class, but also when working independently on group projects:

*Yes, because a lot of people come from China and sometimes they group with – together, and they always speak Chinese; I think ‘oh, I’m in China’.*

*(Lily, Thai female).*

*When they talk together same country, they talk the same language [Chinese] but when we have to talk in a group, we always told them “English please” because we don’t understand you. (Nicole, Thai female).*

*and three of them speak Chinese, not me, and .....because I never can be, can enjoy because they speak Chinese. (Oki, Korean female).*

*Yeh, I have to interrupt them – “Speak in English, not speak in Chinese”. Like that, it is be better if group member, for example, three – one from Indonesia, another from Thailand, another from Chinese. (Alan, Indonesian male).*

There were three issues at stake here; firstly for all students there was a need to develop their English skills and speaking practice in particular, such as taking part in group discussions in class, where English was the only common language. In their previous educational experience, many students had had a considerable amount of exposure to reading and writing skills in English, but far less opportunity to speak and listen to English. Unfortunately many were relying on the sixteen hours per week (over 4 units) of face-to-face class contact during the course to provide them with the skills they needed to cope in a university setting. This expectation was unrealistic (in terms of speaking and listening in particular), especially as most of them did not live in an English speaking environment, and were ‘too busy studying’ to listen to the radio or watch TV, or generally engage in activities which would give them the opportunity to speak and listen in English outside class. Secondly, and of more concern was the fact that in formal groups where students were doing joint projects, the Chinese speakers tended to use their own language most of the time, to the obvious exclusion of the others. While this may have provided them with the opportunity to explain concepts and derive meaning from complex processes, forming ‘clusters’ from the same language/cultural background (Ward & Kennedy, 1993) and providing the ‘comfort zone’ (Volet & Tan-Quigley, 1995) they needed, the consequences of such activities could be detrimental to the other students, both in terms of group cohesion and loss of valuable input. Such behaviour may even be resented by other group members. Finally, and very importantly, where group assignments are concerned, in most

cases equal marks are awarded to all members and so this puts enormous pressure on those students who feel their input is not used or valued, and the reality is that this particular course is, by necessity, assessment driven. To compound the problem, anxiety levels are increased by the fact that many overseas students also place a great deal of emphasis on exam marks, and will battle to get the maximum possible marks. In fact, many will even question their assessment marks in an attempt to increase their scores. Therefore it is important that assessments are seen to be fair, particularly where groups are involved.

### ***Formal Presentations***

In relation to the course requirement to do both individual and group presentations, most of the students interviewed felt that this exercise was valuable, not only in terms of being familiarised with the protocol of doing formal presentations, but in terms of developing much needed confidence in speaking before a group, particularly in a second language. One student recommended more informal presentations in class, even if they were shorter than the formal presentations.

*I think we should have - we could practice more presentations in class – wouldn't necessarily, wouldn't need to be bigger presentations covering a big topic, but just small presentations so the students could get confident..(Andy, Brazilian male).*

When asked about the formal presentation conducted as part of the English Communications unit, others thought that it helped to develop their confidence:

*The presentation was useful because I always shy in front of a group. But that helps me a lot. Anyway I practice a lot, too, because I was really shy.*

*(Oki, Korean female).*

*Yes, very useful, like more professional, more academic than in ELICOS, and I can feel more relaxed when I present in the EC. How can I say – release stress, not much stress? (Oni, Thai female).*

### **Group Discussions**

Some students emphasised the importance of group discussions for encouraging students, Asians in particular, to speak up:

*Lecturers need to encourage students to open their mouths. Because most of Asian students are sometimes too shy to open their mouths. You know sometimes when I am studying in the classroom, I really want to say something, but I am too shy.*

*(Jan, Chinese female).*

While shyness may be indeed an impediment to fruitful participation in group discussion, this may not be the only stumbling block, as the process itself is indeed new to many overseas students. Samuelowicz (1987) explains that:

overseas students are accustomed to be passive recipients of knowledge which is transmitted during the lectures; interactive methods of learning and teaching are seldom used. Consequently, overseas students have, in general, little experience in participating in the whole range of small group learning. (p. 125)

### **Using 'Good' Models of Written Work**

It is becoming increasingly more common to provide samples of work as 'models' of good practice, so that students have a standard to aim for (Ferman, 2003, p. 46). This is considered good practice for all students, but particularly for non-native speaking (NNS) students whose writing needs go beyond just the acquisition of 'literacy' skills. The ELBC already offers some models, both in its texts and in handout materials, but some students indicated that they needed more of them.

*So you're talking about a model – a good model? (Researcher)*

*Yes, so you would look at this model to guide yourself for the next (assignment) ..and or perhaps if the lecturers don't have these models, the lecturers could perhaps use one of the students' work which there was a good example, and put in the blackboard, or put in some ways that we could make analysis of how it could be.*

*(Andy, Brazilian male)*

*For my opinion I need more example, like TSS, how to write critical review  
(Peter, Thai male).*



Currently it is common practice in the ELBC to provide models to which the students can refer. However, experience has shown that the Chinese students, in particular, tend to adopt a 'reproductive approach' - returning chunks of the material unchanged without synthesizing the content or making meaning of it, but with the intention of producing something which is considered worth emulating. This may simply be a part of the transition process to developing independence of thought: however caution needs to be exercised when issuing 'good models'. It would be beneficial for example if the students were made aware of how to use them. One useful suggestion made by Ferman (2003) in relation to mainstream courses is to provide annotated versions of such models. Ferman suggested that this would enact a genre approach, and that "such annotations would highlight the different features of the various stages of texts" (p. 46). This would certainly help Bridging students to identify the crucial elements of a balanced text.

### ***Research Methods***

Although all students admitted to ELBC have completed a tertiary course in their own country, it seems that there is a great disparity among the students regarding the nature of their previous academic experience. While some are familiar with research methods in general, others have little knowledge of such things as basic referencing conventions. This is one area in which the gap can be bridged as it were, since the main aim of the course is to prepare students for their mainstream study. However, in the Bridging course there are other problems that are less easily addressed. For instance, the disparity in ability and different academic backgrounds can create problems during group projects. As one Thai student who was planning to do a PhD the next semester commented:

*Yes, so I come here, is like the way that make research is different from in Thailand, so it's like I have to start it all again, because first time, I think "OK I will do a research", and I think it should the same as I used to, but in here it's different, especially English is still my problem, is quite difficult, but is OK, I think.... And also about the classmates they OK and they friendly, but a lot of them they never do research before, so when we work in groups, when I try to talk about some research I used to do and compare with this, sometimes they don't understand and I have to explain a lot'.*

The disparate backgrounds can even cause difficulty with something as straightforward as referencing. When asked to comment on whether or not information about referencing was useful, a Korean student responded:

*The referencing actually I did a lot when I was in my country too, because it's always important. That is kind of boring to me, because always when I make the report my tutor pointed out again.....so it's kind of freshman things but I am ready to go to a postgraduate course. But actually the research survey, that was pretty useful. That was new to me.*

On the other hand, other students had little or no experience in this regard:

*I think it's especially in ESP, maybe will help in the future in mainstream because in Master, I have to do research a lot my myself, and I have no idea how to making research and also making reference. This part is very important advantage of Bridging. (Peter, Thai male).*

One student even indicated that in her past learning experience, there was not an expectation to acknowledge external sources:

*when I was an undergraduate student in China, when our lecturers ask us to do an essay, we just pick up from this paper, from that paper, without any reference. This is a bad thing. I think this kind of thing is most important.' (Jan, Chinese female).*

### ***Disparity in Levels of Specific English Skills Among Students***

Problems related to disparities of levels among the students also extended to specific English language skills. Even though all students were required to take an English language test prior to starting the course, more emphasis was placed on their overall score, rather than on strengths and weaknesses in different skills.

*From the beginning, just the Bridging course, and just distribute the students according to the name, or when they arrive. I think you should distribute students according to their abilities and the assessment. The teacher will know this student need and what other student need. Some students only need good experience in listening, but is good in writing. I observed some Chinese. They are good in writing, but the listening is very weak, so these students need more listening than writing. (Michael, Saudi male).*

While the suggestion to stream students according to their ability level might be logistically difficult, especially given the other constraints (for example, providing a nationality mix, and ensuring that there are pockets of students in each class with similar

mainstream subjects for project groups) there was one important issue at stake. This issue is that English competency, as measured by a proficiency test alone, does not give a precise indication of where students are at in terms of readiness to undertake a tertiary course in a western institution. The fact that this was acknowledged by the students themselves indicates how pertinent this is. Further, the disparities across the different macroskill areas highlight the various needs of international students. For example, Volet and Ang (1998, p. 12) reported that a test such as IELTS “may be a reasonably good test of reading and writing skills, it may not be as accurate in measuring their aural comprehension skills and their ability to express their ideas in class and in informal social encounters”. The two Saudi students reported concerns about institutions generally making decisions about accepting students onto a course, on numeric scores alone:

*and also one story happened to me, after last year, a Chinese girl she really was very very bad, in speaking, and her English language and she just arrived from her country and has done IELTS, got 6.5 the first time, even though she hasn't studied or prepared herself for it, and she was quite happy and she went to mainstream, and after 7 or 8 months she was exhausted. She was studying two subjects, mainstream and English. (Ali, Saudi male)*

*Is this in Brisbane? (Researcher)*

*In Brisbane, yeh, and so of course the students are learning the spoken skill but I think they have to prepare themselves very well, before the mainstream, so that's why I don't trust any exams to go to mainstream course, if you have for example, like this Bridging Course, and as my teacher you can regulate my skill (Ali, Saudi male)*

### ***Academic English Skills***

There is little doubt that English language proficiency is a key component among a number of factors contributing to academic success (Bellingham, 1993; Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Elder 1993; Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000). However, many international students will be accepted directly into mainstream, or advised to take the Bridging Course, based solely on the English score they have achieved on IELTS or TOEFL at the time of application. Because the ELBC is a specialised course, it offers specific English/academic skills for students whose first language is not English, who may have recently arrived in Australia, and who may not be accustomed to a western teaching/learning environment. On the other hand, students who go directly into mainstream courses, are mixed with local students; if they require specialist help, they need

to seek it out for themselves. In this way, the ELBC offers a valuable transition to mainstream studies.

One Chinese student compared her situation with that of her housemates, all Chinese, and all of whom had achieved the minimum cut-off scores on IELTS to enable them to proceed directly to mainstream.

*What degree are you planning to do next semester? (Researcher)*

*Master of Accounting.*

*And do you know much about that? (Researcher)*

*Just only a little bit.*

*But do you think the referencing will help you? (Researcher)*

*My housemates – I live with three girls and they are all reading the Master of Accounting. They have to do reading, essays and the teacher ask them to do referencing, but now they didn't read the Bridging Course, so that have to spend a lot of time about how to do reference. (Jan, Chinese female)*

Many of the students came to the Bridging Course with the expectation that it was only going to teach them English language skills, since the lack of English language competency was the factor that determined that they should do this course in the first place. However, many were surprised to learn that preparing for their tertiary courses at Curtin entailed much more.

*I don't want to think Bridging. I try to get more score in ..I take TOEFL – I want to try hard to pass – I don't want to take Bridging, but can't, my TOEFL is not enough, so I have to take Bridging. At the first time, I think Bridging teach how to learn English, grammar, something like that, but actually it's very different – it's just like how to make research. (Millie, Indonesian female).*

*Actually when I started Bridging, I didn't expect to get subjects, I just imagine what just language – language communication, since I get in here, I think the Bridging course is quite beneficial, the way I taught by the lecturer is good, and also the curriculum, like survey things, writing my essay, critical review, that whole thing is beneficial for my mainstream. (Oki, Korean female).*

### ***Transition to University Life in Australia***

One of the most common problems facing new student arrivals is the difficulty of adjusting to all aspects of life in unfamiliar surroundings. Because most of the ELBC students are recently arrived, they are still coping with adjustment problems of various kinds, both academic and social. Therefore, in these initial stages they may not be working

to full capacity because of a range of factors. Yet this is an inevitable part of studying overseas, and students need to learn to cope with the necessary changes. One student considered the ELBC experience very valuable in this regard; she saw the role of the ELBC as providing help during her period of transition:

*But my friends suggest me to do the Bridging course. This friend just graduate already from an Australian university and they say when you arrive in Australia, you may be not very familiar with the culture, and some study methods is very different from we learn in China, so we have a period to accustom with. (Jan, Chinese female).*

### ***Intercultural Communication***

The issue of working on a joint project for equal marks within a group is often fraught with difficulties; however the inherent problems are compounded when people with diverse cultural backgrounds, especially strangers, are put together. Most students interviewed found it challenging but useful, while one (African) student was in an impossible situation where he was ridiculed for his ideas. He was eventually moved to a different class where he teamed up with another student, and together they worked well as a pair. Despite having to start all over again two weeks into the course, the problems had been so serious, that in the end he was happy to move.

*So it was still worth your while moving? (Researcher)*

*Yes, it was really ..that was part of administration procedure to maybe notice the problem and solve it.*

*So that's another important aspect of Bridging?' (Researcher)*

*That is so, yes, in fact administration is really sensitive about the problems and in fact it is not easy, I admit it is not easy to deal with people from different backgrounds. The other person might be coming from China, and he thinks he knows English, maybe others may be coming from Indonesia or something like that and people may not know the English I have and the pronunciation is different. The other ways cultures are different in class. Maybe Bridging is very wide in a sense and Bridging needs to cover – it needs at least somebody who is (inaudible) in administration to deal with such problems. I took it as one of the (inaudible) of administration and they solved my problems. (Jonah, Sudanese male)*

This issue also highlighted the need for lecturers and course coordinators to be sensitive to cross-cultural clashes, and to intervene when necessary.

Other students felt that mixing with people from different backgrounds would help to prepare them for their mainstream:

*And what did you learn other than English – were there other skills that you learned that you think will be useful for next year? (Researcher)*

*Maybe like from the social, and I learned how to make friends so I know many people from many countries, even backgrounds, so I know how to ...communicate, yes, because some people from different countries have a different thinking way as me – so that's different, so I learn how to talk with them.*

*What about the ESP group project, where you are doing a piece of work with students from other cultures? How did you find that – was it easy or difficult? (Researcher)*

*No, it's very hard.*

*From what point of view? (Researcher)*

*Sometimes because like I don't know how it is in their culture, but it's very different with my culture. (Millie, Indonesian female).*

One Chinese student reported no difficulties within his group, but attributed this largely to the fact that the group members had similar, if not the same cultural backgrounds:

*I think our group is a very good group. We seldom have trouble to ask people to get together. (Carl, Chinese male)*

When asked about the issue of working with people from other cultures, he responded:

*Yes, because in our group member, only have three, we can see three cultures, China, Malaysia and Thai. All these country, the culture background is very similar. So I didn't find any challenge things to communicate or something with them, and you know K\_\_ and T\_\_, [naming two Thai students]- their parents all Chinese, so because they have a part-Chinese background, so it is very easy for us to communicate.*

In fact, the same student expressed his concern about having to face anticipated difficulties in his mainstream course, as he was able to quote problems encountered by a friend. He seemed to view the ELBC as a sort of training ground for future challenges.

*but I am not very lucky I didn't find any problem I don't know how deal with – that's also a problem. Not like other groups, they have many different problems they learn how to deal with, learn how to communicate. My friend in mainstream now has a very, very serious problem in group meeting. They waste a long time to communicate – not focus on working, focus on communicate what time we have a meet and what about a task of every meeting. They spend time on this, not only focus on work. And I worry about that in mainstream. (Carl, Chinese male.)*

This notion was reflected in the comments of a female Chinese student who valued the opportunity to communicate with students from different backgrounds. She compared her situation with that of her housemates who went straight into Masters Degree courses and

who missed out on such opportunities, and just studied hard day and night, returning home exhausted.

### *Issues of Time and Cost*

Because of visa, financial and other constraints, many overseas students tend to judge their progress in terms of time and money, with great emphasis on what Ritzer (2000) terms 'calculability'. While there are valid considerations to be made in this regard the students often tend to be impatient to finish, and frequently want to 'fast track' to save time, or money, or both; and along the way they sometimes forget about the delicate balance between quality and quantity.

*Because I want to study next semester, I came here since January and start English centre, because I taught myself and I learnt English in Thailand...can't speak properly and can't study in mainstream and I can't get the IELTS, and I want to get the results so I can study as soon as possible, so I take Bridging. (Nicole, Thai female).*

For example, some of the students resented not getting the required IELTS score because of the consequences it entailed, yet afforded little regard for the ways in which they might benefit from the ELBC. However, it could well be that such students are not be fully in a position to assess the true benefits of the course until they commenced their mainstream studies. It was anticipated that while this first round of interviews would provide some idea of the students' first impressions on studying in Australia, a deeper insight into the benefits of the course, would be gained by interviewing them later, after they had made some progress in their mainstream studies.

On the other hand, some students felt that the course could have been longer. In 2003, the public universities in Western Australia moved to a system of 'shorter semesters'. This put a lot of pressure not only on the students in terms of perceived value for money, but on the ELBC teaching staff in that they felt they still had valuable ground to cover in a shorter space of time, but were also expecting the students to work more independently. This is just one symptom of the global challenge in higher education referred to by Altbach and Davis (1999) where the general trend is to tighten up in terms of paying academics, and where "the professoriate is being asked to do more with less" (p. 4).

### ***Information Communications Technology***

One crucial component of the ELBC is Information Communications Technology (ICT) support, an optional extra for those students who need it. Once again, there can be a huge variation in the level of skills that the students bring with them when entering university. It has been well documented that African students, in particular, have often had little or no exposure to computers, and therefore have to acquire these skills as part of their tertiary studies. Altbach and Davis pointed out that “throughout Africa, access is limited to a tiny sector of the population. Access is an increasingly important issue everywhere, as populations demand it and as developing economies require skilled personnel” (1999, p. 2).

The African student in the group had been offered a scholarship to study in Australia, and not only had to improve his English skills, but also his computer skills:

*also, through Bridging there was a very good lesson I got from IT. I had to learn computer and I was not accessible to before – it was very good for me.’*

*You didn’t have any background in IT? (Researcher)*

*Yeh, I did not have it, because it is a subject. Computer is a subject from where I come, and you have to take it as a career’.*

This student considered himself very lucky to have been given the opportunity to study overseas, and was willing to do everything he needed to in order to succeed. His diligence in the face of adversity (he had to move classes because of a clash with one other student) served to highlight the importance of offering a range of educational and technological support to students from developing countries, in terms of moving towards universal access to education.

### ***Critical Thinking***

There was unanimous agreement among the students that learning ways of critical thinking was extremely useful, even though it was very difficult for some. In fact, for many students this was a new and very different approach. For example, students from Confucian backgrounds would be unaccustomed to challenging the views of ‘experts’ or making judgements about what they read. In a report on a study of learning problems of overseas students, Samuelowicz (1987) attributed such behaviour to the nature of “educational practices in many Asian countries, where often only one point of view is presented and consequently the intellectual skills of comparing, evaluating different points



of view, arguing and presenting one's own point of view are not developed" (p. 124). This approach was reflected in the comments of some of the Asian students interviewed:

*Critical thinking is still hard, because sometimes when I read, if it's the subject is interesting, just read through, didn't make any critiques, but I try to now, because it is one way to read the article, one attitude. (Oki, Korean female)*

*OK, so are you learning a little bit from them [housemates in mainstream] about what you think they need for their mainstream studies that you have been able to learn from Bridging? (Researcher)*

*Another thing is critical review. We are, in fact I think most of the Asian students are always..how do you say, just..such as an article – if this article is written by a famous people or an expert, then we have to trust it without any challenge, but I learn from Bridging Course we can challenge if we find many mistakes or find some benefit from article, but in China the teacher told me some things were right, without any wrong, they said.' (Jan, Chinese female)*

*We need research materials so this is the first time that I have studied research methods, and this is one of the parts of this course. Another thing is the critical review, also it gave students the ability to think about the arguments and debatable issues, or something like that and in their mainstreams are important issues. These two subjects were very, very important for me, and this is the first time I have studied such materials. (Ali, Saudi male).*

### ***Unrealistic Student Expectations***

Many international students have had some experience in communicating through English as a second language in their home countries and have a history of achieving high grades in English; they therefore consider themselves to be reasonably well prepared for tertiary level studies. They often come from very different education systems and expect the same results when they go overseas. The Saudi students in this study felt that the marks they received were not indicative of their true ability in English, and quoted higher marks allocated to other students in the class whom they felt were not as good as themselves. Overseas students often over-rate their own ability, many having come from backgrounds where they were successful academically, and are shocked when they get what they consider to be very low marks. This phenomenon is described frequently in the literature:

These students, too have an admirable record of exam successes behind them – otherwise they would not have reached higher secondary or tertiary levels, and they would not have been given the opportunity, by their family or their government, to study abroad. (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, p. 21)

This highlights the fact that students coming from a very different academic culture often have unrealistic expectations of what awaits them.

*but even though I have good experience, and ..I can manage my work in there. But even though I have got low, low, marks in the exams, I don't know why. Maybe because..something else, but I don't know. (Ali, Saudi male).*

Some students felt that the course lacked the type of language specific to their discipline. A few students suggested that the course should be more content-specific. However with intended mainstream courses ranging from nursing to mining engineering, this would be difficult to achieve. Normally the topics and themes selected for course material are generic enough to be of interest to most students. From a more pragmatic point of view, recent changes in the duration of semesters have meant that it would be simply impossible to cater for subject-specific material in addition to the existing core content. Overall, it seems that many students were not very realistic in their estimations of what the Bridging Course could do for them, especially given that it is catering to students from a range of cultural and language backgrounds. This is further compounded by the fact that the students were being assessed under a different set of criteria from what they were used to. Many also found that progress was slower than they had anticipated, and it took quite some time to achieve the grades they wanted.

### *Usefulness of Qualifications*

Most students' energies were focussed on their immediate goal - to pass the Bridging Course and get on to their mainstream course. Very few seemed to look beyond the qualification they were going to receive, and to think about how that would benefit them upon their return to their home country. Only one student spoke about her plans for the future, beyond her mainstream course, which she anticipated would take her a year and a half:

*I want to work in a company in China, and now many famous companies, some global accounting agents have a branch in China and I have to communicate with different people come from different countries. Many people come from other countries seek their career in China because there are many opportunities.*

*(Jan, Chinese female).*

In this regard, the student was mindful of the portability of her qualifications and the importance of English for those who want to work in global corporations. Given its role in the globalisation of tertiary education, this is an issue that clearly needs to be incorporated into the ELBC.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The study proved insightful in that the students involved, representing a good cross-section of the Bridging students who completed the course at that time, came forward with many useful comments, both positive and negative. They were simply asked to comment on their perceptions of the extent to which the course catered to their needs in preparing them for their mainstream course, with specific reference to core aspects of the course, for example, referencing, critical review and formal presentations. It was clear that some students benefited more than others, and that some students benefited in different ways to others. Most students interviewed, however, saw the ELBC as a necessary stepping stone imposed upon them and perhaps did not feel in a position to look beyond it, so concerned were they with the 'here and now' of getting through the course. This was compounded by the fact that they needed to pass, or in some cases to get a mark of 60%, in order to gain admission to their mainstream course. This put a great deal of pressure on them from the very beginning.

One factor that had not been anticipated by the researcher was that students who have to take the Bridging course (regarded as an extra hurdle to overcome along the way), could ultimately be better off than those who achieve 'direct entry' by getting the required minimum cut-off score on IELTS or TOEFL, despite additional tuition fees, living costs and time taken to complete their studies. In particular, working in culturally diverse groups, writing longer essays, thinking critically and referencing were all regarded by the students as being elements of the course which would be valuable for their future studies. In addition, this course helps to ease new arrivals into academic life in Australia, rather than having them 'thrown' into a more impersonal environment where they would have to work independently from the very beginning. This is particularly important for postgraduate students, who work alone a lot of the time. For those students, it is more difficult to find support among fellow students, teachers and counsellors. In a paper on the

acquisition of academic literacy, Braine (2002) speaking from his experience as a non-native speaker graduate student in an American university, explains that:

Simply stated, a knowledge of one's chosen field of study, research skills, and good reading and writing skills form only the foundation for the acquisition of academic literacy. To build upon this foundation, graduate students must adapt quickly to both the academic and social culture of the host environment and the personalities and demands of their teachers, academic advisors and classmates. Graduate students need to acquire advanced academic literacy, and this acquisition only comes, whether these students like it or not, along with complex and often confusing baggage. (p. 60)

This raises the question of whether or not it would be appropriate to recommend that all international students from non-English speaking backgrounds take this course, or something similar, as it provides crucial language, social and academic skills for new arrivals, and may help them to avoid possible problems associated with going directly into mainstream.

There is no doubt that the task of offering such an intensive course to students who come from such a broad range of disciplines and cultures is in itself a challenge. Added to this, many students face problems of adjustment, and have family and work/financial commitments to cope with. It seems that the Bridging students were generally happy with the course, but since most of the students were recent arrivals (ten of them had been in the country less than 5 months) they were still becoming accustomed to life in to Australia, and more specifically, to academic life here. Unfortunately many seemed to have unrealistic expectations of what lay ahead.

The most significant theme to emerge from the present study was the tendency of Chinese students to stick together and to speak their own language. While this may be recommended for new arrivals as an interim strategy to help such students to adjust, it should be discouraged in the long term, particularly when students enter their mainstream course. In the interests of creating global citizens, all students, regardless of their background, should be encouraged to work in culturally mixed groups. Volet and Ang (1998, p. 5) recommend that:

Although it is quite understandable that students would naturally prefer the company of peers from similar ethnic background, the extreme position of making no effort to mix with peers from other cultures defeats one of the main purposes of internationalisation. If students are to learn about their own and other cultures and,

ultimately, prepare themselves for living in a global multicultural environment, they need to risk the emotional challenge of moving outside their zone of comfort.

Ultimately the task of creating global citizens has to be seen as a reciprocal arrangement that extends beyond the notion of simply helping international students to adjust to a western culture, to seeing them as valuable assets along the path to global citizenship. In this way, universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be providing “a global consciousness to students” (Altbach & Davis, 1999, p. 4). Through extensive and carefully articulated internationalisation programmes, universities have the possibility of fully integrating Australia into the Asian region. The advantage for students is described by Kalantzis and Cope; “At the very heart of the new university experience, every student should become more comfortable with global cultural diversity and learn how to benefit from it” (2000, p. 31).

Certainly for all of the students, the ELBC was a generic pathway course, and therefore did not give them an accurate picture of exactly how things would work in each mainstream course. Two important elements emerge here: firstly, the ELBC students were one unique group in the sense that they were not yet integrated fully into campus life with other (non-Bridging) students and subject-specialist lecturers. Secondly they were not in a position to judge for themselves what they needed for their future studies until they had actually commenced. Therefore, it was decided that the same students should be interviewed again after they had started their mainstream course, so that in retrospect they could look more objectively at their preparation course, and be more specific about the particular skills they needed, and how effective the course had been in offering them these skills. All of the students interviewed were willing to return and be interviewed at a later date, and provided contact details for future reference. In the short term, therefore, follow-up interviews with these students would give a more complete and accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the Bridging Course, in relation to its objectives.

In the long-term, however, a broader study is recommended. The ELBC commenced at Curtin University in the late 1980s as an equity and access initiative for migrant students, but later included international students in increasing numbers. To date, no tracer study of international students in Curtin who have taken the course has been completed. Such a tracer study would ideally track the academic records of international

student students who had undertaken the ELBC, and compare their results with those of students who, by achieving the minimum English language proficiency scores, had gone directly into mainstream.

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## Appendix A

### *Profile of students interviewed*

Age	Gender	Nationality	First language	Intended course	Length of time in Australia
24	F	Thai	Thai	PhD. Psychology	3 months
26	F	Chinese	Chinese <sup>a</sup>	Master of Accounting	3 months
32	M	Saudi Arabian	Arabic	Postgraduate Diploma, Clinical Pharmacy	1 year 9 months
28	M	Saudi Arabian	Arabic	Bachelor of Nursing	1 year 4 months
26	M	Chinese	Chinese	Masters	4 months
27	M	Thai	Thai	Postgraduate Diploma, Information Mangagement	3 months
30	M	Indonesian	Bahasa Indonesia	Masters in Information Technology	3 months
26	M	Sudanese	Dinka	Bachelor of Education	5 months
24	F	Thai	Thai	Postgraduate Diploma, Marketing	3 months
23	F	Indonesian	Indonesia	Postgraduate Diploma, Information Systems	3 months
31	M	Brazilian	Portuguese	Diploma in Education	4 years
35	F	Korean	Korean	Masters in Public Health	3 months
27	F	Thai	Thai	Masters	5 months

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<sup>a</sup> First language as reported by the informants.

## Appendix B

### **English Language Bridging Course student questionnaire**

*Please answer the following questions as carefully as possible.*

#### **About you:**

1. Family name \_\_\_\_\_
2. Given name \_\_\_\_\_
3. Sex \_\_\_\_\_
4. Date of birth \_\_\_\_ (day) \_\_\_\_ (month) 19 \_\_\_\_ (year)
5. Country of birth \_\_\_\_\_
6. Nationality \_\_\_\_\_
7. First language \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is your highest level of education (*Tick ONE of the following*)

PhD

Masters degree

Postgraduate certificate/diploma

Bachelor degree

Certificate/diploma

#### **About your English:**

9. How did you learn English *before* coming to Australia?

I studied English at secondary/high school in (*name country*) \_\_\_\_\_ for  
\_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_ months.

I studied English at university/college in (*name country*) \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_  
years \_\_\_\_ months.

I studied English in a private language school (*name country*) \_\_\_\_\_ for  
\_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_ months.

I had a private tutor in (*name country*) for \_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_ months.

10. Why did you learn English *before* coming to Australia?

(circle 'yes' or 'no' for each of the following statements).

English was compulsory at school	YES	NO
English was compulsory at university	YES	NO
I chose to study English at university	YES	NO
I needed to know English to travel overseas	YES	NO
I needed to know English to study abroad	YES	NO
I needed to know English for my job	YES	NO
Other reason ( <i>please explain</i> )		

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11. Did you study English in Australia *before* starting the English Language Bridging Course? YES NO

If yes, where? \_\_\_\_\_  
 for how long? \_\_\_\_\_ weeks  
 \_\_\_\_\_ months

12. Did you take an English language test before starting your Bridging course? YES NO

If yes, which one, and what score did you get?

TEST SCORE

IELTS Reading Writing Listening Speaking Overall

TOEFL \_\_\_\_\_

other (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

13. How long have you been in Australia?

I have been in Australia for \_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ months.

14. Have you ever lived in another English speaking country?

YES NO

If yes, which country did you live in?

I lived in \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ months.

**About your future study:**

15. What degree course do you plan to start next semester?  

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16. Is this course undergraduate or postgraduate? *(please circle one)*  
17. If postgraduate, do you plan to study by coursework or research?  
*(please circle one)*
18. Why did you choose to study at Curtin University?  
*(you can tick more than one box if you wish)*  
Curtin offers a special degree course that I want to do  
I couldn't get into another university  
I wanted to get a degree from an English speaking university  
Other reason *(please give details)* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
19. Why will your degree be important when you return to your country?  
It is a good qualification  
I need it for my job  
My English will be better  
Other *(please specify)* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
20. For your future study, rate each of the following skills by circling one of the numbers ranging from 1 to 4
- |                    | Very important |   | not so important |   |
|--------------------|----------------|---|------------------|---|
| Reading            | 1              | 2 | 3                | 4 |
| Writing            | 1              | 2 | 3                | 4 |
| Listening          | 1              | 2 | 3                | 4 |
| Speaking           | 1              | 2 | 3                | 4 |
| Critical thinking  | 1              | 2 | 3                | 4 |
| Working in a group | 1              | 2 | 3                | 4 |
| Referencing        | 1              | 2 | 3                | 4 |

*Thank you for your time. Your assistance is greatly appreciated. Good luck in your studies.*

## **LINKING COMMENTARY: PAPER 5 TO PAPER 6**

The interviews conducted among those students who had recently completed the English Language Bridging Course (ELBC) provided some useful feedback about how the course helped them. While all had undertaken tertiary studies in their own countries, it was apparent from their responses that this experience did not necessarily prepare them for studying in a western environment. As a result much of the information they provided centred around those aspects of studying in Australia that were different to the students' previous academic experience; for example, challenging the work of respected authors in a given field, or having to acknowledge the use of others' ideas. It is not surprising that of primary importance to the students were the changes they had to make in their ways of thinking and learning, and how they coped with these changes. Overall the problems experienced by the students can be broadly divided into four categories; English language skills, academic English skills (for example, doing formal presentations), intercultural communication, and issues of time and cost.

As noted in the previous paper, international students applying to undertake studies at Curtin (undergraduate or postgraduate) who do not meet English language requirements for direct entry, may be offered a place on the ELBC. However this means that the only reason those students take this course is that they have failed to meet English language requirements for mainstream. Once they commence the course, they realise just how much they need to do before commencing their mainstream studies. For example, many need a lot more practice on listening and speaking, and this requires more work than can be covered in class, although the students usually find that formal presentations in class are very useful. Many of the students are unaccustomed to academic language based skills, such as referencing, and therefore have to learn very quickly how to master these. Intercultural communication is always a challenge, but the benefits of having mixed cultural groups forces the students to speak English as the common language; that is, unless there is a disproportionate number of students who speak the same language in a given cohort, as happened with this particular group. In addition to these issues, the requirement to participate in the ELBC places additional pressure on the students in terms of the time and cost involved, as well as the pressure to succeed.

Despite these pressures, since this course involves more than just learning English language skills, many of the students interviewed found that they learned valuable skills that would help them in the future. Regular contact with friends or housemates who had gone directly into mainstream courses confirmed in some cases that the Bridging Course students even had the advantage in many ways. Therefore despite the inevitable delay in commencing their chosen course, most felt more confident about coping with a number of academic skills that they needed to develop for successful study at Curtin.

The aim of the ELBC is to prepare international students for their mainstream studies, and the aim of this study was to investigate the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the course in doing so. However, the scope of the study was limited in that the students had only completed the Bridging course, and had not yet commenced their chosen degree course. Therefore, they were not fully aware of the types of skills they were going to need, given that the students in this cohort were bound for a range of disciplines within the university. Their mainstream studies would be different in many respects; for example, they would be mixing with local students as well as other international students; they would also be part of the campus at large, as opposed to discrete classes within a small department of the university.

The initial interviews had taken place in November, 2003, with most of the students planning to commence their mainstream studies in February, 2004. One student attended a summer school unit in order to 'speed up' her progress. To complement the original study, therefore, I decided that these students would be better placed to assess the effectiveness of the Bridging Course after they had completed their first semester. This would provide a more balanced view of its effectiveness from the students' perspectives. Of the original cohort of 13, one student did not take up his place at Curtin, returning to Brazil for family reasons. The remaining 12 returned to be interviewed in August/September 2004, having completed their first semester in mainstream. Of these students, 10 were doing postgraduate courses and 2 were doing undergraduate courses. In undertaking this second round of interviews two issues were immediately apparent: first was the students' willingness to come back and talk about their experiences despite busy schedules; second was the obvious increase in their confidence levels – a stark contrast to my first impressions of the same students when they first arrived on the Bridging Course. In addition, the students were able to articulate their thoughts better, and were able to be much more

specific about the types of skills they needed. Despite some lingering grammatical difficulties, without exception, they communicated very effectively.

The responses from the students indicated that their problems once again related to the process of adjustment – for instance, many felt it took much more time than they had anticipated to become accustomed to lecturers' accents, and they still felt they needed help developing their general listening skills. Others felt shy speaking in front of native speakers of English, and desperately wanted to get to know as much as possible about 'Aussie ways', to communicate with local students, and even to sound like Australians. In terms of the formal academic skills, there was unanimous agreement that the critical thinking skills they had learned in the Bridging Course were invaluable for their further studies, and that the course had also been a great help for structuring an extended essay. Finally, many expressed the value of friendships they had made in the Bridging course (and not just with students of the same nationalities) which carried on throughout their mainstream studies and provided them with much moral support. The final paper in this volume reports the major findings of the second round of interviews.

Following this final paper is a concluding chapter, outlining some of the themes, issues and results that emerged in the course of this portfolio. In addition a list of recommendations pertaining to these is provided. It is hoped that these will provide some practical guidelines which will provide mutual benefit for those who are involved with international students.



## **PAPER 6**

### **TERTIARY EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA – THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE**

#### **Abstract**

Increasing numbers of overseas students are applying to undertake various courses in universities in Australia. For many of these students, Western Australia is a popular destination, partly because of its geographical location and partly because of its relatively low cost of living. For students from South-East Asia in particular, Curtin University of Technology is a popular choice because of its reputation, and because for many years it has offered a number of pre-tertiary pathway courses, in addition to a range of graduate and undergraduate courses, which are open to international students. Those students who have applied for a degree course at Curtin, and who meet all of the university's academic entry requirements except English language proficiency, may be offered a place on the English Language Bridging Course (ELBC). This is a one-semester course which provides them with the academic English language skills they will need to be ready to commence their mainstream course. In Semester 2, 2004, twelve students who had completed the ELBC the previous year and who had gone on to a range of mainstream courses, were interviewed about the language related difficulties they faced in their studies, and about the ways in which the ELBC had helped them in this regard. The students noted a number of obstacles they had to face during their first semester; however they also indicated that they had benefited from the participation in the ELBC. These benefits included being able to write an extended essay, being able to think critically, being able to do formal presentations, understand questionnaire design, having made the transition to (university) life in Australia, and already establishing friendships which continued throughout their mainstream studies at Curtin.

#### **Background**

The English Language Bridging Course (ELBC) was established in Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia in the late 1980s as an equity initiative to help students whose first language was not English, to improve their English skills to a

point where they were considered ready to commence tertiary studies at the university. At the time, most of these students were permanent residents; however by the new millennium, changes to government policies regarding student visas meant that most of the students on the ELBC were international students. The course guarantees entry into a Curtin degree program upon successful completion of the course (this may require an overall pass mark of 50%, or a higher score, depending on the requirements of the receiving school within Curtin). The course also offers students a “high level of English proficiency, a strong academic foundation by providing links to mainstream course of study and a developed understanding of Australian tertiary culture”. (Department of Languages and Intercultural Education, 2005, p. 6).

Students who enrol in the ELBC do so because they have applied to study in a mainstream course at Curtin, and have taken one of the major English language tests (usually IELTS or TOEFL), but have failed to meet the English proficiency requirements for direct entry to their course, and receive an offer to study on the ELBC first. Therefore they often mistakenly view the course as a purely language-based course, rather than as a preparation course which deals with a range of language-related skills they will need for tertiary study in Australia. These students also see it as a necessary extra which they have to complete before becoming eligible to commence their chosen degree course; inevitably this is an added burden in terms of extra time and cost.

Although the Bridging Course prepares students for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and for a range of disciplines, the content matter is based on contemporary topics and is generic, rather than specific to one academic area. While the students are neither streamed according to their specific English language skills nor their chosen discipline, some provision is made to ensure that in each given class, there are at least three students from similar disciplines (for example, Engineering). This is because they are required work in groups to undertake a joint research project on a subject of their choice in the ESP unit. These groups usually comprise three or four students.

### **Overview**

From the ELBC cohort of Semester 2, 2003, a group of 13 volunteers had initially come forward at the end of the course to be interviewed about their impressions of the course. They identified a range of important issues, about how they believed the ELBC had

helped them, including formal presentations, group discussions, using good models, research methods, disparity of English proficiency levels, academic English skills, transition to university life in Australia, intercultural communication, issues of time and cost, Information Communications Technology (ICT), critical thinking and unrealistic student expectations. However, at that stage they had not yet commenced their mainstream course, and therefore had not fully integrated into student life at Curtin. In fact, the Bridging Course comprises a discreet group within one division of the university, where all of the students are international students, and complete the same course. It was therefore decided that in order to get a more accurate picture of the students' impressions of the Bridging Course, that they should be interviewed again at a later stage, when they had completed at least one semester of mainstream studies. This was done at this point because they would be in a better position to accurately pinpoint their specific needs, and possibly be more confident in their ability to express themselves orally. With the benefit of time and distance, they would also have had ample opportunity to reflect on certain aspects of the Bridging Course, particularly in relation to their current studies. The focus of this paper is the results of the second round of interviews.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Twelve students (six males and six females) ranging in age from 24 to 36 volunteered to take part in the interviews. All but one were planning to study on postgraduate courses after Bridging. The students came from Thailand, Indonesia, China, Saudi Arabia, Korea and the Sudan. A detailed profile of the students is provided in the Appendix. With the exception of one student who had to return to Brazil for family reasons and therefore did not take up his offer of study at Curtin, all of the students interviewed for this study were the same as those interviewed previously (see Paper 5).

### ***Procedure***

The 12 students were interviewed individually about their impressions of their mainstream course and how the Bridging Course had helped to prepare them for their studies. There was no formal structure to the interviews; the researcher simply asked for

information on specific core aspects of the Bridging Course, and sought clarification where appropriate. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was tape-recorded and later transcribed without alteration. The transcriptions were coded systematically according to emerging issues, and cross-referenced with the literature, where applicable. Finally the themes occurring most commonly in the interviews were categorised.

## **Findings**

According to the students' responses the following were classified as issues: lecturers' expectations of students' English levels, students' own impressions of their English language levels, lecturers' and students' accents, listening skills, access to 'local' knowledge, integration of local and international students, taking part in tutorials, employment issues, coping strategies and lecture content. As with the first round of interviews, the students' main priority was to master the language well enough to cope with their academic tasks, but this time, they also saw the successful integration with local students and being able to fully participate in in-class and out-of-class activities, as being an integral part of their academic success. The students' comments are summarised in the discussion that follows.

### ***Lecturers' Expectations of Students' English Levels***

Previous studies have found that subject lecturers at university are often found to be either unaware of or insensitive to the particular linguistic demands made on students who are studying through the medium of a second language and they may not make any extra provision to accommodate the needs of those students (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000). Dunworth and Kirkpatrick (2003, p. 33) also found that "In fact, in Australia the assumption is generally made that if applicants have met the stated literacy or language proficiency requirements of the university then they should be enrolling already armed with the necessary linguistic resources". This point also emerged in this data. When asked about how the Bridging Course prepared her for listening and note-taking in lectures, one Indonesian student replied:

*You know sometimes the lecturer in the main course, it's like they didn't care about where you're from, what your background, even you are an international student, because they expect like, you do the Master, so they expect your English is better; at least you can catch up, so they didn't care they just talk faster and they just talk*

*what they want, and the mindmap is very helpful, because drawing is faster than writing sometimes. (Millie, Indonesian female).*

This example highlights not only how a typical NNS speaker has to grapple with the dual linguistic task of processing and recording information simultaneously, but how she attempts to utilize skills learned on the Bridging Course to help her to do so.

### ***International Students' Impressions of their own English Language Skills***

Anecdotal evidence suggests that international students, whose first language is not English, are often found to be reluctant to 'speak up' in class and with their peers. From the perspective of the students interviewed in this study, this is indeed a common occurrence. However, the reasons for this are frequently misunderstood by the lecturers and the other students. The international students themselves attribute this reluctance to shyness and the fear of not being understood. It would seem from the current data that these students were most concerned about their speaking ability. This can have profound effects on their studies at many levels. For example, lack of confidence in their speaking ability makes it difficult to make friends, as reported by one student:

*Do you find it difficult to make friends with local students? (Researcher)*

*Yes.*

*Why is that? (Researcher)*

*Maybe speaking. Sometimes I feel – what do you say, I have no confidence about my speaking. Maybe I am a little afraid to chat with them.....Mm, it's very difficult to make friends. I think maybe the problem is the language. (Jan, Chinese female)*

Some students also reported difficulty participating in tutorial groups, simply because they were scared of not being understood:

*Actually the first time I afraid, because I know that I can't speak English properly and maybe they speak better than me, so I think "What if I speak, and they didn't understand me, or maybe I answer the wrong answer?" I am afraid like that. (Millie, Indonesian female).*

*And also we have to speak slow and clearly – try to, you know pronounce correctly otherwise they don't know what I'm talking about. That's a very worrying part for me. (Nicole, Thai female).*

Such concerns were echoed by another student:

*Sometimes I would like to answer, but I shy, because my accent, you know what I mean. I am afraid that the lecturer or the classmates will not understand my answer so I just keep silence. (Oni, Thai female).*

Generally, they reported being much more self conscious about their speaking ability in their mainstream course where more native speakers (NS) were involved, than in the Bridging Course, where all of the students were non native speakers (NNS). Several used expressions like ‘be brave’ and ‘have courage’, indicating that they had to make a concerted effort to overcome their inhibitions about their speaking ability.

On the other hand, self-perceptions of English language deficiencies can have much more far-reaching effects. One student felt that she was often ignored by the other students, simply because she was being judged by the perceived deficiencies in her language ability:

*Once if I improve my English maybe I can get over that.*

*Do you think that if your English improves or it is perceived to improve, that people will have more respect for you? (Researcher)*

*I think so, because the English actually, when we socialize with the people, language is covers all my features – not all, but mainly; so if I speak like bad pronunciation or childish words because I cannot – put together, even though I can read, it's not really my words when I express my opinion: it can not combine with my speech so..that's the first impression that they can get. Once they know each other then maybe, it's a different story, but in each course, English is very important. (Oki, Korean female).*

In most cases, the students felt that they could not fully integrate into the student body until they were satisfied that their English proficiency had reached a certain point, regardless of their knowledge of the subject matter.

### ***Lecturers' and Students' Accents***

In a survey of overseas students in higher education in Britain, Campbell (1973) reported that “Practically all students admitted that at first there was a problem comprehending lectures because of the lecturers’ accents”. Others (for instance, Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Chalmers & Volet, 1997) have found similar problems, which are most common in the early stages of study in the host country. Several of the students who participated in the current study reported that it takes approximately two weeks to get accustomed to each new lecturer’s accent. They also found that lecturers frequently spoke too fast:

*How did you cope with the lectures? (Researcher)*

*The first time the lecture was quite difficult when I started, maybe the first two weeks, and then I can get used to it.*

*What did you find difficult about it – was it accents, or technical language?*  
(Researcher)

*It was accents, and the speed. (Oki, Korean female)*

*Yeh, well the first time it wasn't OK for me because sometime the lecturer they say it very fast, and not clear enough. (Alex, Indonesian male).*

*What about listening to lectures? Did you have to attend a lot of lectures?*  
(Researcher)

*Yes.*

*Was that OK for you? (Researcher)*

*Yeh, it's good, but I think at the beginning of the semester why I feel a little difficult is that I still couldn't clearly understand the lecturers, but after one or two weeks later I used to the lecturer's accent.*

*The same lecturers all the time, was it? (Researcher)*

*Yes, same lecturer, but I feel confused. When you...such as at the beginning of this semester we changed another lecturer. I feel at the first one or two weeks, I still couldn't used ..clear understand. But after two weeks, no problem. Maybe I still need to practice.*

*(Jan, Chinese female).*

This student also referred to problems associated with varieties of English-speaking accents, as it is not unusual for lecturers themselves to be non-native speakers of English. She commented:

*Like in business law, the lecturer come from Malaysia and his English is – at first we need to listen carefully and carefully. After the course I often feel very tired. But when we get used to it, we can understand.*

The students also reported that some lecturers' accents are easier to understand than others. For example,

*Based on my experience in (Curtin Business School) CBS, only several teacher pronunciation is a little bit different, I mean hard to catch. Other teacher pronunciation is very clear, and very good. (Carl, Chinese male)*

When asked what the greatest challenge was for him when he started his mainstream course, one student commented that the accents of both the lecturers and the students created the most difficulty:

*Well it was, you know the lecturer was going very fast.*

*Speaking fast, or covering a lot of content? (Researcher)*

*Both. You know, and before you get familiar to the guys with you in the lecture, or the tutorial and you mainly feel, to get used to Australian accent, mainly, because some of them they use a very difficult accent, you can't immediately catch what they*

*say – you can understand what they mean, but you can't catch all the words they speak.*  
(Michael, Saudi male).

The accents of the local (Australian) students also caused considerable difficulty. One student indicated that she felt she could not be accepted by her (local student) peers until she could speak with a similar accent.

*I found that if I speak with Australian students at the first time, they feel us weird. Like you have a different accent, so I have to try more harder, to like they accept me.* (Millie, Indonesian female).

Another student suggested that practice in listening to different accents should be incorporated into the Bridging Course:

*I think maybe listening course, lecturers could give more.. such as.. ask them to listen not only to normal English, standard English, but some accents, different people with different accents. Because in the mainstream often at the beginning of the semester different accents are difficult to understand.*

*Do you mean Australian accents, or lots of different accents, for example, Indian accents, Canadian accents, New Zealand accents? So, a mixture? (Researcher)*

*Yeh, a mixture, but I think mostly Australian accents. I think it's difficult, you know especially when we in the group work or when we communicate with local students. Sometimes we understand the lecturers' accent, but we couldn't – we don't understand what they said, the Australian local students, especially the young people.* (Jan, Chinese female).

### ***Listening Skills***

Overall, general listening skills were seen as being very important for tertiary studies, but two students indicated that a lot of time was needed to develop effective listening skills.

They commented:

*I don't think it (The Bridging Course) can be better, because it actually takes time, so as long doing some listening, that helps because the six months. But I don't know how can you improve the listening things. Because it takes time.* (Oki, Korean female)

*Um, understanding is based on listening skill. Listening skill is not – can not be improved overnight.* (Carl, Chinese male).

This factor is often overlooked by recently-arrived students, eager to save time and money doing preparation courses, but just wanting to 'get on with' their studies.



### *Access to 'Local Knowledge'*

Another difficulty associated with processing lecture content is the use of what is termed 'local' knowledge – contextual references to facts which are assumed to be known by the students, but which may not be familiar to overseas students. This has been noted by Chalmers and Volet (1997, p. 91) and Hartley (2003, p. 55). Some of the students in the current study were conscious of their lack of such knowledge. They also saw this as an impediment when it came to completing some of their study tasks. One student who had been in Australia for two years indicated that when other students spoke of events which happened prior to her arrival, she had no idea what it was all about.

*Is it important to know what's going on here? (Researcher)*

*I think – if you know, it's good for you; it's more advantage.*

*Does that help your academic work or is it because you are more accepted in groups if you can discuss current things? (Researcher)*

*I think both, because in the assignment group we need to talk about that one as well. Also when we get together each other whatever assignment or talking or lifestyle – I think it's quite good if you know something around here, otherwise no-one talk. And then you just keep quiet. And then – no relationship. (Nicole, Thai female)*

*Like it's difficult for me, because we have to discuss a lot. About some issues like just in Australia so we don't know, we don't have any idea.*

*You don't have local knowledge? (Researcher)*

*Yes, especially like about car or beer, I mean the lifestyle here, we don't have any idea about that, so just keep quiet. (Oni, Thai female).*

Although 'local' knowledge may refer to anything from key course information to incidental facts, it is evident from these interviews that international students want to know more about what is going on around them so that they can successfully complete the tasks required of them and at the same time, feel they can contribute to general discussions. It is, therefore, important that lecturers and students are aware of this and do not make assumptions about local knowledge which may exclude overseas students.

### *Integration of Local and International Students*

Previous studies have reported that Australian students are less interested in intercultural contact than their international counterparts (Volet & Ang, 1998; Nesdale & Todd, 1993). The South-East Asian students interviewed in this study all expressed a strong desire to integrate with the local Australian students. They desperately wanted to be

accepted by the 'locals' and they also saw this possibility as an opportunity to improve their English skills, and in particular, to learn to speak with Australian accents and to find out more about Australian 'ways of thinking'. However, from the perspective of the international students interviewed, a number of barriers impeded the successful integration of local and international students. The first was that many found that local students often had part-time jobs and therefore were not available to get together on campus outside class hours. The second factor was that several students perceived their 'language barrier' to be the main problem, adding that other international students whose first language was English (for example, Americans, Canadians) were in a different situation, and therefore did not experience the same problems. Therefore, they saw the language factor as the most significant impediment. The third and most complex factor was described as a 'way of thinking' by a Korean student, who was doing a Master of Public Health degree. Despite having a solid background in her chosen field, she was acutely aware of her inability to communicate with Australian students in tutorials.

*And taking part in tutorials? You know, expressing your ideas in tutorials? Did you find that difficult or not? (Researcher)*

*It's not actually difficult in terms of knowledge. What I find difficult is the association with Australians, like the way of thinking. It's quite different.*

*In what way? (Researcher)*

*If..when I discuss with them, I always make diagrams in my head, you know, this is topic, and underneath this topic we need to discuss this and this, but I don't actually explain around that topic or make that topic understandable you know the examples or bring about the examples around this side. That's very hard for me because I cannot express that way properly. And also their experience is different from my experience, so when I explain as an example, they don't understand what's that. So basically even when they talk, they treated me like – childish. I don't know what word – because there is even like barriers. (Oki, Korean female).*

When asked if there was anything we did not cover in the Bridging Course that would have been useful, another student also referred to 'ways of thinking':

*I think maybe..mm.. still the culture..maybe their..how do you say, the thinking ways? Sometimes I find that in some aspects we have a total different thinking ways. I mean maybe it's difficult to communicate. (Jan, Chinese female).*

Participation in tutorials which involved mixed cultural groups was therefore extremely difficult, despite the best intentions of the international students.

Despite Curtin's 'Aussie Buddy' program which was designed to match up local and overseas students in order to facilitate a cross-cultural exchange outside class time, similar problems were experienced. Only one student in this study reported accessing the program,

but she found that ‘if you don’t approach, they don’t approach’, so it required a lot of effort on her part. Therefore for her at least, it was not as successful as she would have liked.

One student noted that sometimes the lecturers actively helped to mix the groups, while others simply indicated to the students that:

*We need multicultural in the group or something like that. (Peter, Thai male).*

On the other hand, one student reported an incident where she was in a mixed nationality group, and the lecturer was completely unaware of how she was treated within the group simply because she was an international student:

*The lecturer ask us to do what kind of factors influence demand of health care, and I mentioned outbreak of disease or new technology; those things, and the students they didn’t listen what I said. They’re just bothered because my speaking was made slow, or accent; I don’t know why, but they, when the lecturer asked us what we discussed and they dropped my comments and talk about what they think, right, what they did. And the lecturer asked the other group. The other group mentioned what I suggested to them and the lecturer said to them “you know you had a good point”. But they didn’t mention about but their attitude was slightly changed maybe, what they do. (Okie, Korean female)*

This was one of three separate incidents reported by the same student (one of which she described as ‘shameful’) where international students in mixed groups were deliberately excluded. Incidents such as this demonstrate the acute need for cross-cultural sensitivity on the part of lecturers and students.

### ***Taking Part in Tutorials***

The students interviewed in this study also wanted to take a more active part in tutorial discussions, but frequently found that they needed time to access the correct language, while the Australian students were able to articulate ideas promptly:

*Uh, I think because about critical thinking, and my very slow that Australian, when lecturer asks, the Australian just come out with the answers, something like that. We have – we need time to think about it and try to express it out. Sometimes I want to say it out but I don’t know how to pick the word, what kind of sentence I have to tell, something like that. (Peter, Thai male).*

*So what have been the most difficult things for you in mainstream? (Researcher)*  
*I think the most difficult is about discussion part. Yeh, because we have tutorial and lecture, right? For tutorial we have to – every unit we have to discuss, but as I told you we don’t know sometimes and uh, yeh, it is very difficult for me.*  
*So, small group discussions in particular? (Researcher)*  
*Not small, like class discussions. (Oni, Thai female).*

In the latter case, the student may have lacked both the language and the knowledge to be able to contribute in tutorial discussions, which are an important part of tertiary studies.

### ***Employment Issues***

Issues related to working part-time in conjunction with studying were referred to in two contexts during the interviews. Most students need to work part-time in order to supplement their income, despite the demands of managing a heavy academic load. In the current study, it was mostly the local students who were working, and this was viewed in one of two ways by those international students interviewed. Firstly, they found it difficult to integrate with locals because the latter were studying part-time and working part-time, and therefore tended to be off campus when not attending class. Secondly, in some cases, (for example, in Curtin Business School), the locals were able to access knowledge of their chosen field through their part-time work. This was seen as a great advantage over the international students when it came to class work. On the other hand, the international students were mostly full-time and did not usually have the time or the opportunity to work. However, those who did work reported that it was difficult to find, either because of visa problems or because employers were dubious about their English language skills. In fact, those who did manage to get work, found it very useful for their English, and welcomed it for the skills they learned and for exposure to local accents:

*I think the work that one I work is a good thing, because I can learn English more, speak English more and often. So that's good one and I can learn slang or accent or whatever. Then I can adapt in the class as well, because most of them are local. They talk something and I say, ah, yeh, yeh, I got this, and then they talk. That's good; good ways. (Nicole, Thai female).*

This situation is also an example of the desire of international students to both mix with and be accepted by the locals, both in a social and an academic context.

### ***Coping Strategies***

Despite the enormity of the task of adjusting to a very different academic and social culture, several of the students showed great resourcefulness in finding ways to cope with their learning situation. For example, many tried to do as much reading on a particular topic before class so that they could follow the content more easily.

*And then, going on the lectures, how did you find the lectures?(Researcher)*

*Uh, well, if we prepare before we join the lectures, it's easy.*

*How do you do that?(Researcher)*

*By reading... you know, going through what do you call it – the outline, attending the tutorial and accessing the point before you come to - prepare yourself before you join the lecture, so that it makes everything easy for you and clear. (Michael, Saudi male).*

Some students reported accessing a range of support classes (for example, study skills, computer skills, referencing or research skills) within the university, either on the advice of friends, or from information provided by the university website. One Chinese student was cognizant of the need to avoid plagiarism, and developed strategies to record his references electronically, noting that random referencing checks take place. He also shared these skills with a friend who was having difficulty in this regard.

Generally, the international students reported a reluctance to speak to lecturers if they had a problem, preferring to consult friends first. Many of the students had also formed informal study groups with other international students from the same disciplines, and related the benefits of working collaboratively:

*Yes, even when the presentation we practice before together we can critique the others say, what we have to improve. (Millie, Indonesian female).*

The students in the current study seemed to find it easier to make friends with other international students than with Australian students. In particular, they seemed to be keen to form friendships with international students whose command of the English language was good, for example, one student was very happy to make some friends from Kenya, because she felt that she could learn from them.

Strategies such as those referred to above are, of course, commonly used by all students, but with the added problems caused by a language difficulty among international students, these activities require considerable initiative on their part.

### ***Lecture Content***

In terms of the level of English language proficiency level required for tertiary study, some academic courses have been identified as 'linguistically demanding' such as Medicine, Law, Linguistics, Journalism and Library Studies, while others, such as Agriculture, Pure Mathematics, Technology, Computer-based work and

Telecommunications are considered 'linguistically less demanding' (UCLES, 2003, p. 5). Two students in the study reported that the subject matter in their mainstream courses was difficult. One said that he was dealing with a new subject and therefore the content was unfamiliar, which compounded the difficulties faced by a being second language learner.

*And was the English language of that content difficult too? (Researcher)*  
*Yeh, yeh, that's quite difficult, the English language because sometimes the lecturer, they talking too much. Not the way they talking but the topic they talking about is relatively new for me, and I have to catch up with the topic. (Alex, Indonesian male).*

On the other hand, some international students may enter courses which are historically less influenced by internationalization, such as teacher education (see Hartley, 2003), and this might entail specific language demands. For example, the Sudanese student interviewed, who had commenced teacher training, found that the course content was not so linguistically demanding, for him, but that when it came to his practicum he needed a high level of communication skills in English.

*Although the subject I am taking is not that much in need of English and all this. But it needs that because English is the only mode of communication in Australia and you have to communicate clearly to the students, to understand the content I am giving. So I see that EC is really good and English for Specific Purposes. (Jonah, Sudanese male).*

Therefore, special care may need to be taken to ensure that international students are fully prepared for disciplines such as teaching, so that they can communicate effectively and appropriately.

### ***Specific benefits of the Bridging Course***

#### ***Course Materials***

Several commented that they had kept their Bridging Course materials and accessed them on a regular basis to help them with their work. For example, one student referred to a checklist she had been given in the English Communication module when preparing for a formal presentation, as she found this to be very useful. A PhD student found her Bridging Course textbooks very useful for writing:

*How did Bridging help you this semester, or did it help you in any way? (Researcher)*  
*Help a lot in writing, because I have to write for my proposal, yes, it's quite helpful. Because I use all the Bridging Course books, open and OK, try to find out the way*

*to..because sometimes I don't know how to connect the sentences, so I just re-read all the books, then it's OK. (Linda, Thai female).*

Several of the students found the Academic Writing module useful for writing and presenting extended essays:

*After the Bridging Course I know how to write, how to organize my ideas, and the structure. For me, this is not difficult. (Jan, Chinese female).*

This student added that she had taken the IELTS test recently for the second time, this time for immigration purposes, and noted an increase both overall and in her writing scores, since she first took the test prior to commencing the Bridging Course.

In particular, learning how to use referencing conventions was seen as a crucial skill for mainstream studies. This was noted by some students as a great advantage over their mainstream counterparts who had not taken the ELBC:

*So how did you get on with first semester? (Researcher)*

*First semester, at the beginning of the semester I feel a bit difficult, but when I get used to it, afterwards it's comfortable.*

*How did you get used to it – what helped you get used to it? (Researcher)*

*Because I think the Bridging Course is a big help, especially the reference or when I am doing a big assignment, a major assignment, the most important part is the reference. Because I remember a group working, one of my friends come from Hong Kong, and he did not attend the Bridging Course, he went direct to study in mainstream, didn't know how to do the reference, but at this time I also tell him to do it. The lecturer will.. and the lecturer told us this is important part; if we didn't do it well he will deduct marks. (Jan, Chinese female).*

### **Critical Review**

There was general agreement among the students interviewed that the task known as the 'critical review' was very useful for mainstream studies. The critical review is a key component of the Tertiary Study Skills (TSS) unit. It involves a number of skills, including summarizing, analysing and critiquing articles on contemporary topics. Although traditionally ELBC students find this one of the most difficult components of the course, the current study found unanimous support for the critical review and its usefulness in preparing them for the tasks they faced in mainstream, even though the idea of thinking critically still proved challenging for some:

*difficult about critical thinking, because I think, uh, Asian style of learning and teaching is like uh-teacher tell you to remember nothing much about whatever they say, you just remember is, but now we have to write a report about a critical and give opinion and sometimes it's hard to write down because you just read the*

*textbook and you say 'oh, it's good idea' and 'oh I'm agree with' and...most of the time I am agree with the textbook.*

*You did critical review in TSS? (Researcher)*

*Yes.*

*Was that useful at all? (Researcher)*

*Yeh, very much. (Peter, Thai male).*

### **Formal Presentations**

In the ELBC, the students were required to give two formal presentations as part of their assessment. The first was an individual presentation for English Communication, and the second was a joint presentation towards the end of the semester with the English for Specific Purposes group, where the students presented the findings of their group project. Several of the students interviewed in the study found these formal presentations very useful when they came to mainstream study. In particular, the experience gave them confidence when speaking in front of groups of people. They also found the information regarding how to structure a presentation very useful.

### **Questionnaire Design**

The design and administration of a questionnaire forms a major part of the assessment for the ESP unit. The business students found the process of questionnaire design particularly useful for marketing units. The student who went on to do teacher training also found it useful:

*Yes, questionnaire is really good because that thing is also there in the mainstream. We were designing some quizzes, also we were interviewing some teachers, and some students also. And that one was like a basic starting point. It was really good. (Jonah, Sudanese male).*

### **Computer Skills**

Most of the students interviewed seemed to be coping well with the computer skills required of them, seeking help from friends or using university-based support classes where needed. However, one student still admitted needing help for the more technical tasks.

*You have to write, type it and all this. That was really good. Though I am not that fast, the time is there now. If there is more technical things like power point and all this, sometimes I need assistance.*

*You need assistance. Who gives you the assistance? (Researcher).*

*Because most of things are done in a group, so I don't go and seek for advanced people to do it...as part of the group it will be the role of that person, and I will learn from that person. (Jonah, Sudanese male).*



In this way, he was able to draw on the strengths of other students in order to help improve his skills.

### ***Transition to (University) Life in Australia***

For several of the students interviewed, the ELBC was seen as an important part of making a successful transition to life in Australia, but especially to university life. One student had not studied for some time, and was generally adjusting to being a student once again, and to dealing with specific tasks:

*Tell me about.. reflecting on Bridging. How did it help you? Were there specific ways in which it helped you? (Researcher)*

*Yes, I think you know in my case I am away from school since I graduated from uni, it is a long time, more than 10 years, so getting used to the school is very important again , you know, to focus on the study, so that way Bridging give me the time to adjust those kinds of ...'*

*To studying in general?*

*Yes, and they give me the information about..like the critique, how to make the format of critique, that's helpful; and the essay format. (Oki, Korean female).*

One student found that the ELBC helped her to adjust both to the different lifestyle, and to the different educational environment:

*You just mentioned getting used to the lifestyle here. Do you think Bridging was important to have that time to adjust to being in the university and just the whole life experience; do you think that period of time going to Bridging first, rather than going straight into mainstream was good? (Researcher).*

*Exactly. I think that's a good idea because as I can feel like Asian. I'm not sure – most of them are like most – some students from Asia lack confidence and also a bit afraid to get study in the mainstream because their first background education, I think, is quite different from here – standard education different, very different. (Nicole, Thai female).*

Other students had been unaccustomed to referencing conventions, and found that it was very important to reference correctly in mainstream in order to avoid plagiarism. Therefore the information provided through the ELBC on how to reference correctly was very important.

Most of the students interviewed in the study were doing postgraduate study. In their case, the ELBC had particular advantages in providing them with information on specific skills they needed. This is crucial because of the relatively solitary nature of postgraduate work, and the fact that postgraduate students are often left to their own devices.

*So tell me how do you think now, looking back, how do you think Bridging was helpful for you? The things you have had to do in mainstream? (Researcher)*  
*Every unit for – in Bridging is very important, very helpful, especially TSS and ESP. And they're the difficult ones, aren't they, in many ways? (Researcher)*  
*Yeh, very difficult. And ESP has helped to write a report, to write a proposal, very helpful. Yeh, the pattern. Because if I didn't study Bridging Course I don't know how to start like a big project, something like that. And TSS teach me how to think, and critique. (Peter, Thai male).*

*Any other comments you would like to make about Bridging, looking back? (Researcher).*

*Generally it's very helpful for me, yeh for like Asian students that have no idea how cope with the western style of learning – of study. It's quite useful. If I didn't study Bridging Course I think I have a lot of problems to study postgraduate. (Peter, Thai male).*

*Bridging Course – it's you know a sort of preparation for the mainstream – how to cope with the load, how to cope – how do to the assignments, how to do the mainly the - for example, and how do you call this one, group project, last semester?*

*ESP? (Researcher)*

*From ESP, yeh. You know, I find it now in one of my units, which is the research unit, it becomes more easier than others, even more than the local students. We know – it's easy. (Michael, Saudi male).*

### ***Friendships***

One very positive outcome of the Bridging Course was the friendships that emerged from the course, particularly those forged through working collaboratively on the ESP group project. Because students were teamed up in small groups according to their specialist field, they had to work very closely during the Bridging Course on a specific project. They were doing similar disciplines in mainstream, so they often ended up sharing classes. Others simply made friends during the Bridging Course, which was their starting point for study in Australia, and these friendships continued long after the course had finished. Several students reported the benefits of the mutual support, both social and academic, provided by these friendships.

*I think Bridging Course is not only useful in academic way, but for me, PhD student, most of the time I work alone, so when I came here, first time I came here, if I start doing PhD, I think I have a lot of trouble from culture shock, because I don't have anyone to talk much, so I came here, I got friends and I continue meeting them until now, so that's quite good. (Linda, Thai female).*

Because of the fact that ELBC students are placed in the same classes for the duration of the course, they have better opportunities to create close friendships, especially during their first months in Australia. This also helps them to adjust to the day-to-day routine with others in similar situations before embarking on student life within the broader student body.

### ***Suggestions for ELBC***

A number of suggestions were made by the students about possible additional components which could be included in future courses. These included learning how to create a business report for management, and learning how to annotate texts. Some students also suggested that discipline-specific information would be useful; for example, having someone from Curtin Business School (CBS) to speak to the students; another student recommended that journal articles from his specific discipline be used as texts in the ELBC.

Students generally appreciated the level of pastoral care offered by the Department of Languages and Intercultural Education (DoLIE) and often felt quite lost when they commenced their mainstream course and were left to work things out for themselves. This was of particular concern to one student:

*Many lecturers just give the students the headings and that's it – and leave the students to just reading through the books and something like that – so the students haven't given a real experience from the lecturer, so this is not gonna give a good benefit for the students, so if you just tell me, this is blah, blah and go and do it by yourself, you haven't taught me anything... So I would appreciate if you could think about this because until now, the lecturer or most of them just give us reading or some notes or something like this, and you have to do everything by yourself. Even regarding to the assignment or the article or the review or something like this, they just give us the subject and got told 'do it' and they have told us when you are ready, you are supposed to be ready with the language itself. (Ali, Saudi male).*

This student suggested that one unit of mainstream be taken concurrently with the Bridging Course. While this may not be logistically possible, his comments highlight the difficulties he faced in becoming an independent learner.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study revealed that while generally the students interviewed saw the ELBC as a very useful starting point for launching into mainstream studies at Curtin, they were still

facing many challenges, most of them either directly or indirectly related to their English language proficiency. On one level, the students' language skills seemed to have improved over the semester in Bridging, and they were much more confident in their ability to deal with the basic tasks required of them. On another level, however, they were now dealing with a new set of (subject) lecturers who were, by definition, not necessarily trained as teachers, let alone English as a Second Language (ESL) specialists. Because of this, the students still had a number of language issues still to deal with; for example, coping with a range of accents, or being able to articulate more abstract concepts, particularly in class or during group discussions.

Overall, those students who possessed the most initiative were able to best achieve their goals, but many felt they had to constantly strive to be assertive, or be ignored. The students with the strongest personalities and those with the most positive attitudes experienced the fewest problems, and in fact, they were of great support to peers with whom they had taken the ELBC.

What is of most concern is the fact that, in general, more effort is being made on the part of the international students to adjust to a western style of thinking and become 'like the locals' in many respects, than by those with whom they come into regular contact in the host university; that is, the 'local' students and staff. This reflects a certain prevailing discourse described by Sanderson (2002) in Trevaskes, Eisenchlas & Liddicoat, (2003, p. 5) regarding the view that Western knowledge and thought represents the 'apex of civilisation', while non-Western knowledge and thought is 'the Other'. The danger in this regard is that 'The potential contribution that international students can make to the university system, especially through knowledge and understanding of the global community, is overlooked in the web of anxieties about standards and resources.' (Trevaskes, Eisenchlas & Liddicoat, (2003, p. 5). In other words, the onus seems to lie with the visitors to change and adapt, rather than to be seen as a resource to be built on, where all students are encouraged to see the full range of multiple perspectives offered by the global student body. Therefore universities which accept increasing numbers of international students need to adjust their approach if they are to embrace the ideal of being truly internationalized.

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## Appendix

### *Profile of students interviewed*

Age	Gender	Nationality	First language	Intended course	Length of time in Australia
25	F	Thai	Thai	PhD. Psychology	13 months
27	F	Chinese	Chinese <sup>a</sup>	Master of Accounting	13 months
33	M	Saudi Arabian	Arabic	Postgraduate Diploma, Clinical Pharmacy	2 years, 7 months
29	M	Saudi Arabian	Arabic	Bachelor of Nursing	2 years, 2 months
27	M	Chinese	Chinese	Masters	14 months
28	M	Thai	Thai	Postgraduate Diploma, Information Mangagement	13 months
31	M	Indonesian	Bahasa Indonesian	Masters in Information Technology	13 months
27	M	Sudanese	Dinka	Bachelor of Education	15 months
25	F	Thai	Thai	Postgraduate Diploma, Marketing	13 months
24	F	Indonesian	Indonesian	Postgraduate Diploma, Information Systems	13 months
36	F	Korean	Korean	Masters in Public Health	13 months
28	F	Thai	Thai	Masters	15 months

<sup>a</sup> First language as reported by the informants.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the last twenty years or so, Australian universities have been quick to respond to an increasing demand to provide places for international full-fee paying students. This response has been partly based on the desire to provide opportunities for developing countries to take advantage of the educational and economic benefits of globalisation, but it is also based on the desire to fulfil a market demand which helps to solve the economic difficulties now faced by Australian universities. However, in the rush to attract these students, it seems that the key stakeholders involved in the decision-making process have not been fully cognisant of the implications of accepting students from very diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, the willingness to put a lot of effort into recruiting such students is not necessarily matched by a willingness to put into place strategies to help both students and university staff to deal with the problems associated with this diversity.

While some departments within individual universities which have a high proportion of international students (for instance, Curtin University of Technology) have put in place strategic initiatives to address this issue, the situation is not uniform across all departments. The papers presented in this portfolio highlight some key challenges facing Australian universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At a time when quality is constantly under the spotlight, it is crucial that it is in no way eroded by the pressure to recruit overseas students for economic gain. As Paper 1 demonstrates, quality may be seriously threatened by economic constraints, by the need to respond to the market in a very competitive environment, and by issues of English language proficiency. While a number of criteria must be observed to ensure that all students fully meet admissions requirements, central to these is the need to demonstrate adequate English language proficiency. It is therefore essential to use only valid and reliable tests for admissions purposes. At a time when technology is revolutionising the ways in which we deliver education, it is also essential that technology does not interfere in any way with the validity and reliability of the tests we use. Paper 2 outlines a number of issues for consideration in relation to using technology in language testing for international students. At the same time, however, the role of the English language in achieving academic success must be acknowledged and therefore continued English language support should be available to all international students in the interests of fairness and equity.

Most Australian universities are now formally subscribing to the ideal of internationalisation at policy level, but it seems that the potential offered by the presence of students from a range of languages and cultures now represented on campus is not being fully realised. For the most part, international students are seen as a source of revenue, when in fact they bring to the universities so much more than economic gain. Since universities are now preparing their graduates to become world citizens, international students are, as yet, an untapped resource.

At the same time, the transition to life in an Australian university is not easy for students who come from non-English speaking, non-Western backgrounds. Therefore it is important to recognise the difficulties faced by such students in the early stages of adjustment. These difficulties often include language problems normally identified as weaknesses, when in fact they are often related to lack of experience. For example, many overseas students have had little opportunity to practise speaking and listening (as opposed to reading and writing) in English in their own countries, and these problems will lessen with exposure and practice. Paper 4 provides some examples in this regard, highlighting some of the difficulties faced by these students in the early stages of their study in Australia.

Papers 5 and 6 provide some insight into some of the other tensions that exist, from the perspective of a cross-section of international students studying at Curtin. These students also provide examples of the ways in which the English Language Bridging Course (ELBC) prepared them for their tertiary studies at Curtin.

However, most international students go directly to mainstream, and do not have the benefit of a one-semester preparation course, such as that offered by ELBC at Curtin University. Therefore there is a need to examine a range of options that will lighten the transitional burden for such students. Some of these options require only smaller changes or adaptations, while others require much larger and longer-term solutions. Although not all the institutional problems experienced by international students can be solved immediately, a number of initiatives could help to bridge the gap that currently exists between international students (particularly those from non-English speaking, non-Western backgrounds) and the staff and local students in the host institution.

One small change that would assist international students, especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds, is the modification of course delivery. The lecture continues to be the dominant mode of teaching in universities, and while students



eventually adapt to the lecture format, this is particularly difficult for those whose first language is not English. This problem could be ameliorated by an awareness on the part of the academic staff of the potential problems associated with linguistic features; for example, accent, pace of delivery, and the use of slang local references can all be confusing, especially in the early stages of the semester. Therefore, lecturers should be encouraged to ensure that their content and delivery are clear, and, where appropriate, are supported by visual aids.

One area which clearly needs attention is that of cross-cultural sensitivity. It is apparent from the interviews that some international students are still subject to overt racism on occasions, despite university policies which specifically address this issue. While it is not always possible to change the attitudes of individuals, a university which prides itself on having an international profile and on subscribing to policies of internationalisation (as described in Paper 3), should put all available resources into developing cross-cultural awareness for both students and staff to help minimize such clashes. On a practical level, academic staff should be encouraged to exercise their power to facilitate the integration of different cultural/language groups in such a way as to acknowledge the reciprocal benefits of having such diversity on campus. This might help to break the 'them' and 'us' mentality so commonly felt in mixed cultural groups.

One of the consequences of government funding cuts to Australian universities has been the increasing trend towards employing part-time and sessional staff. The implications of this were felt by some of the students interviewed in the study. For example, one student indicated that most of his lecturers are part-time, and he found it impossible to find them when he needed to talk to them, adding that some problems simply could not be dealt with by email. International students often prefer to consult their teachers in person, but several found this difficult, because the lecturing staff were not on campus. Current funding constraints also mean that academic staff are under increased pressure to take on more responsibilities; a PhD student interviewed indicated that she felt she needed to see her supervisor more often than she did, but she realized that he was simply too busy to do so.

One area of concern to emerge was the fact that students seemed to have certain expectations which, for various reasons, were not met, as in the examples above. Lack of consensus between what students expect and what happens in reality can cause stress, confusion and frustration. The reasons for this are varied; for example, the students may

have trouble understanding unit outlines, or they may be influenced by their previous learning experience, where faculty have done more for them in their home countries. Therefore it is essential to make sure that unit outlines, for example, are written in simple language and clearly organized to avoid ambiguity. In fact, all written communication, such as important notices, policy documents (such as information on plagiarism) should be clearly written.

By the same token, it is essential that academic staff do not make any assumptions about what their students already know, particularly in relation to reference made to local events or situations. Nor should they assume that students come to their course fully equipped with the range of linguistic and computer skills that will be required of them during the semester. An awareness of the previous background of the students would go a long way towards avoiding problems which may escalate as the semester progresses.

It is also clear that the need to adapt is often seen as being a one-way process. For example, as illustrated in Paper 6, international students often strive to integrate with the locals, to sound like them, and to be accepted by them. Furthermore, there is often too much emphasis on their perceived language 'deficiencies', rather than on how the university can benefit from their diversity and learn from the multiplicity of skills they have already demonstrated, for instance by mastering at least one other language (as suggested as an integral part of globalisation – see Paper 5). If indeed higher education in Australia is to be seen to be truly internationalised, then the universities themselves need to look at how they are going to adapt to the contemporary needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Therefore, based on the information in this portfolio and in particular the data collected for Papers 5 and 6, a number of recommendations can be made. These include:

- Promoting cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity among university staff and students across all disciplines;
- Facilitating the successful integration of culturally mixed groups in class and on campus;
- Clearly articulating what is expected of the students, and what they can expect of the university;
- Putting in place strategies (professional development) which will help academic staff to make their lectures clearer, especially in terms of delivery;

- Publicising information regarding the services available, (for example, via websites and orientation programs);
- Encouraging collaboration between academic subject staff and English as a Second Language (ESL) specialist staff to promote an awareness of the specific language and learning difficulties faced by international students.

If the current trend for overseas students to seek places in Australian universities is to continue, it is essential that quality is maintained, but that quality must be clearly defined within an international context, and this involves a university-wide commitment, from administration right through to staff and students, to cater for the entire student population as global citizens.