Five Years On:
English Language Competence of International Students

OUTCOMES REPORT
JUNE 2013
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Symposium Steering Committee
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- Paper 1 Preparation and Selection (Dennis Murray and Sophie Arkoudis)
- Paper 2 In-course Student English Language Development (Katie Dunworth)
- Paper 3 Outcomes: English Language and the Transition to Work or Further Study (Pamela Humphreys and Cate Gribble)

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About DIICCSRTE
DIICCSRTE is a Department of the Australian Government tasked with helping to shape Australia’s future economy through skills, learning, discovery and innovation. For more information go to www.innovation.gov.au

DIICCSRTE’s International Education and Science Division manages international education, science and research through fostering international partnerships, providing strategic policy advice and enhancing international students’ experiences. For more information go to www.aei.gov.au

About IEAA
IEAA is Australia’s leading international education professional organisation. Its members are individuals from all education sectors – university, vocational education, schools and English language – as well as individuals in government and the corporate/business sector concerned with international education. IEAA’s mission is to enhance the quality and standing of Australian international education by serving the professional needs and interests of its members and by promoting international education within Australia and internationally. For more information go to www.ieaa.org.au

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report disseminates the outcomes from a National Symposium, Five Years On: English Language Competence of International Students, held on 25 February 2013 in Melbourne. The detailed key messages are contained in the three discussion papers commissioned for the symposium and in the outcomes report, which together make up this publication. These resources should be read in conjunction with one another. They are also available online at www.aei.gov.au. Video highlights of the symposium itself may be viewed at www.vimeo.com/ieaaustralia.

The symposium was timely in light of the establishment and the emerging responsibilities of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) for the development of threshold standards, including English language standards for all students, the development of streamlined visa processing requirements for universities and continued media interest in the English language competence of international students.

The symposium succeeded in its aim to critically examine the efficacy of Australian policy and practice in this area and to suggest actions for improvements in light of the emerging requirements facing institutions, students, employers and professional groups.

The key messages of the symposium reflect the considered views of stakeholders about how policy and practice should be enhanced. These are widely and strongly supported and are a clear pointer to future action in terms of institutional and program priorities, quality assurance and key research priorities.

In particular, there was strong support for four broad priority actions:

■ Identifying and disseminating good practice to enhance English language competence across institutional strategy, policy, curriculum and learning and teaching.
■ Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of English language professional and academic staff and building more effective working relations between them.
■ Conducting research in priority areas determined in conjunction with education institutions, students, standards and quality assurance agencies and with Australian employer and professional groups
■ Addressing the motivations and expectations of students and employers and involving them at all stages from research design through to program design, delivery, evaluation and improvement.

These initiatives will be pursued in consultation with relevant stakeholder groups in government, industry and in the wider community with a view to further quality enhancement in institutional policy and practice in all education sectors.
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Background

Five years on from the landmark 2007 National Symposium, English Language Competence of International Students, the 2013 Symposium considered research evidence, reviewed progress and critically assessed achievements with a view to assisting education institutions to ensure that international students are prepared effectively in English language to enter and succeed in their tertiary studies and to transition effectively into the workforce.

The symposium was especially timely in light of recent developments, including the establishment and the emerging responsibilities of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) for the development of threshold standards (including English language standards for all students), the development of streamlined visa processing requirements for universities and continued media interest and coverage about English language competence of international students.

Aim

The aim was to consider what is known about the efficacy of Australian policy and practice in this area and to consider actions for enhancement of future knowledge and practice. The symposium’s outcomes are relevant not only to education institutions but also standards authorities, governments, professional bodies, employers and students.

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

Symposium participants

140 invited participants from 70 Australian institutions attended the symposium from all education sectors (higher education, vocational education and training, ELICOS and schools). Invitations were sent to all Australian universities; peak bodies in all education sectors; relevant Commonwealth and State Government authorities; auditing, accreditation and quality assurance agencies; student representatives; researchers; and professional, business and commercial associations and organisations. Institutions and organisations represented at the symposium are listed in Attachment 2 (p.21).

Discussion papers

Recognising that the issues surrounding the English language competence of international students are both complex and multi-faceted, and understanding that media coverage is frequently based on perceptions as much as fact, IEAA commissioned three discussion papers as background resources for the symposium. Financial assistance was kindly provided by AEI. The discussion papers were prepared by topic experts and brought together current research about the issues, with a view to enabling evidence-based discussion of these issues.

The three discussion papers were:

- **Paper 1** Preparation and Selection (Dennis Murray and Sophie Arkoudis)
- **Paper 2** In-course Student English Language Development (Katie Dunworth)
- **Paper 3** Outcomes: English Language and the Transition to Work or Further Study (Pamela Humphreys and Cate Gribble)

The discussion papers examined current knowledge and gaps in knowledge about the English language competence of international students, drawing on Australian and international research; discussed implications for Australian policy and practice in this area; and identified critical issues for consideration by participants at the symposium.

Copies of the papers were provided to participants in advance of the symposium. The papers should be read in conjunction with this report. They are published with the report and are available on the IEAA website ([www.ieaa.org.au](http://www.ieaa.org.au)) and the AEI website ([www.aei.gov.au](http://www.aei.gov.au)).
Symposium format and program

The symposium program is given in Attachment 3 (p.22). The day’s discussions were kindly moderated by Professor Shirley Alexander, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Teaching, Learning and Equity), University of Technology Sydney. The authors of the discussion papers presented key findings and questions from their papers. This was followed by a multi-sector panel session identifying key matters from across the spectrum of interest. Panellists were:

- Chris Wallis English Australia
- Jenifer Pilon Government Schools (NSW)
- Salih Al-Zahrani Council of International Students Australia (CISA)
- Bronwyn James Association of Academic Language and Learning
- Maria Fiocco Higher Education

In depth discussion around key questions occurred in six breakout groups. The groups were given a shared set of three main questions to consider and respond to: (1) What are the three most critical issues that need to be addressed?; (2) What should be done to address these?; (3) What priority research is needed to inform practice? Groups were asked to identify and prioritise the way forward and highlight implications for stakeholders.

A panel discussion followed, involving panellists reflecting on the outcomes of discussions. The discussion panel members were Salih Al-Zahrani (Council of International Students Australia) and Ashley Jones (Australian Computer Society).

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) Commissioner, Dorte Kristoffersen, provided comment on the role and interest of TEQSA in the issues discussed. Professor Monique Skidmore, Pro Vice-Chancellor International and Major Projects, University of Canberra kindly provided closing comments.

Explanatory note

Throughout this report English language ‘competence’ and English language ‘proficiency’ are used interchangeably to mean the ability to use English in context. Competence/proficiency are not used to mean achievement of a particular score on a point in time assessment or test.
DEFINING THE ISSUES

The success and achievements of the 2007 Symposium and the subsequent changes in policy and practice that it elicited have led to a shift in emphasis in the discussions about the English language competence of international students over the last five years. The shift has been from predominantly front-end considerations (preparation, selection and entry) to an increased focus on issues related to in-course English language development and support and an increased focus on the desirable level of proficiency at the point of exit from tertiary study. This is a fundamental and necessary reemphasis.

The challenge for 2013 Symposium participants was to define and clarify priority issues and to reflect on how they might be addressed.

The 2007 Symposium is recognised as a landmark event. Its deliberations and its findings led to heightened and widespread understanding among all stakeholders subsequently resulting in concerted thinking and action on the part of researchers, education institutions, quality assurance agencies and governments.

In particular, in 2008-09 it led the Australian Government to commission the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) to develop Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities.

The impact of the Good Practice Principles has been felt throughout the university sector especially and research into the issues has developed significantly.

The last five years have witnessed a paradigmatic change in the approach in particular to in-course English language development in higher education. Student English language development is now mainstream, the target of high-level initiatives within institutions and intense scrutiny from without.

But the external context has also moved on. The Bradley Review of Higher Education, the Baird and Knight Reviews of ESOS and of Student Visas respectively, the Base Funding Review, a series of VET related reviews, a Senate Enquiry into the Welfare of International Students, a Review of Visa Assessment Levels, the Asian Century White Paper and the International Education Advisory Council’s report, ‘Australia – Educating Globally’, have all helped reshape the tertiary education landscape.

The advent of new forms of information and communication technologies which decouple learning from time and place constraints, impact the way academic programs and courses are delivered to an increasingly large, geographically dispersed and diverse student body, and pose particular challenges to Australia’s tertiary education institutions.

In addition, the English language competence of international students at both the point of entry and at graduation, as well as claims of soft marking, continue to attract media interest and controversy.

There is increased focus on the issue particularly with the emerging responsibilities of Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) for threshold standards, including English language standards for all students. International students are frequently the primary focus of this conversation, but given the diversity of the Australian student community and Australian Government policy to increase the participation of lower SES students it is crucial to understand and act on the understanding that English language proficiency is relevant for all students.

The issues are complex and the challenge for symposium participants was to identify priority matters and attend to these using the evidence from current research to consider how education institutions might best enhance the English language proficiency and the learning outcomes of international students. As with the 2007 Symposium, the complexities are a challenge both to understanding and to action.

The advent of TEQSA is seen as a game changer, given the broad ranging implications of threshold English language standards to all students. As in 2007, a principle starting point was the acknowledgement that balance needs to be achieved between the responsibilities of individual institutions to ensure the quality and suitability of their education provision and the responsibility of peak bodies and national agencies, including governments, to ensure a measure of quality common across the sector.
Increased accountability through TEQSA and ASQA, and the introduction of learning and teaching standards means that tertiary institutions need to become better at assessing, monitoring and evaluating English language learning outcomes. English language entry requirements have an important and vital role to play within this context.

Down the track we can see that the import of the GPPs includes the momentum they helped build, not only within education institutions but also across the system, leading to the development by TEQSA of threshold standards involving a focus on English language standards for all students.

Considerable progress has been made in the matter of English language competence of international students since the 2007 symposium. However, although there has been increased awareness of the issues around preparation and selection since 2007 many of the key issues remain constant:

- There is still a lack of appreciation of the variety and complexity of pathways to higher education programs and of the wide variety of risks and benefits associated with these different pathways.
- In many instances, international students may enter schools, VET and higher education institutions via pathway programs without completing a formal test of English. There are no common English standards for these pathways.
- Receiving institutions frequently use pathway programs to suit a variety of institutional needs. This is problematic because of the conflation of purposes and measures.
- The distinction between the assessment of proficiency and achievement in relation to English language is not well understood by receiving institutions.
- The commercial, proprietary nature of standardised tests (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL) undermines the ability of students and institutions to compare test scores on different tests.
- Research on IELTS and TOEFL tests scores as predictors of academic success are equivocal in their findings.
- English language test scores alone do not predict academic success.
- There is a need for better, large scale tracking studies of the performance of international students who have undertaken a wide variety of English language pathways into tertiary education.
- There is no accepted assessment framework to determine language progression or learning outcomes in place in the ELT sector in Australia.

A number of key issues were identified in Discussion Paper 1 (p.23) requiring consideration:

### Multiple pathways

There was no support from the symposium to limit the number and variety of pathways leading to higher-level studies. Pathways provide a diverse, flexible and equitable way for students to meet minimum academic and minimum English language proficiency standards to succeed in their further studies. The disadvantage lies in the lack of a standardised framework for reporting requirements and outcomes of various pathways. It is sometimes difficult for institutions to know or be assured that students entering via particular channels are sufficiently competent in English to participate effectively in their tertiary studies. There is very little comparable research on which to draw reliable and valid conclusions. That which exists tends to throw doubt on schools and to some extent VET pathways (Discussion Paper 1, p.23).
Multiple English language tests
For institutions and their staff, the availability of a range of English language tests, together with the continuing
difficulty in the absence of rigorous equivalency studies to agree the measures of equivalence for scores on
different tests, means that determinations about suitable English language requirements and assessment of
proficiency levels for entry are likely to become even more challenging than they currently are.

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

Predictive ability of English test results
There has been significant research conducted to investigate whether it is possible to predict academic
performance from English test results. There is a major difficulty in reaching a conclusion about whether it
is possible to predict academic performance from English test results given that academic performance is
influenced by a large range of factors, language proficiency being just one of them. A further difficulty is
that different courses of study have very different linguistic demands. Taken together, these factors ensure
that placing great weight on a numerical test result, one that is already a composite of a number of discrete
scores for different linguistic skills, is a risky business. Even so, it is an activity that admissions staff undertake on
a regular basis. Guidance based on a meta-analysis of the available research evidence is needed to assist
institutional decision-making.

Implications for institutions
Faced with the growing complexity of issues surrounding English language entry for tertiary study, what
should institutions do? A more nuanced rather than a broad-brush approach to the selection and admission
of international students might be called for, based on the linguistic demands of particular fields of study.
Universities, in particular, might reasonably explore the development of enrolment practices that consider
English language together with academic ability for entry to particular courses.
The 2007 Symposium stimulated substantial advances in the area of in-course language development. Needs assessment, primarily through the introduction of post-entry language assessments, has become a growing field of inquiry. Interest in embedding language development in the disciplines is on the increase, accompanied by an increasingly solid body of evidence of improved learning outcomes that supports its implementation. Other activities, such as the development of online resources and peer-to-peer programs, illustrate the extent to which staff within institutions are cooperating to share their knowledge and skills – another priority identified in 2007.

Some institutions have already integrated language development into their strategic plans, policies and curricula. Some have commenced systemic initiatives to provide students with the educational tools they need. There is now a widespread understanding that English language entry scores are just the starting point rather than a static state of competence, and that both students and institutions have a shared responsibility to promote student language development.

There are now very significant models of practice for effective in-course student English language teaching. These cover the embedding of language development in the disciplines and courses as well as specific academic language development activities including introductory programs, generic workshops and seminars, individual student consultations and counselling, online resources and e-learning, credit-bearing language development units, peer-to-peer programs and extra-curricular opportunities for student language development (Discussion Paper 2, p.52)

In short, the last five years have witnessed a paradigmatic change in the approach to in-course English language development in higher education. Student English language development is now mainstream. It is the target of high-level initiatives within institutions and intense scrutiny from outside.

Nevertheless, there are still fundamental issues that remain. Beliefs about how best to promote language growth will always be in flux, but there is now a particular imperative to work within the current standards-based system and develop an approach that is coherent across the sector.

Three major conceptual shifts have emerged strongly from the literature over the past five years:

- Wide recognition that ‘English language competence’ is developmental rather than static
- All students need to have access to opportunities for language development
- General rejection of remedial approaches to language development and student support in favour of inclusive and supportive educational environments that take a ‘joint venture’ approach to education.

While further studies are likely to be beneficial in facilitating evidence-based decision-making, over the past five years a large amount of research has been conducted that has moved the sector towards what might be described as a tipping point for a new paradigm for in-course English language development in higher education.

Given the overarching nature of the issues identified and the legislative framework in which they are situated, taking the next steps towards addressing these challenges will require action at a sector and institution-wide level.

Achieving this will require collaboration between all stakeholders, including policy-makers, decision-takers, disciplinary experts, language specialists, pastoral care providers and students. Potentially, a more ‘joined-up’ approach to international student development may build students’ sense of belonging, of agency, security and ultimately of employability. Five years on from the 2007 Symposium there is an opportunity to recognise the value of diversity not only as part of an equity agenda but as a necessary requirement for all students and their teachers to function effectively in a global environment.

**Key issues**

- How to position English language development as a core rather than marginal teaching and learning issue
- Measuring and/or monitoring student language development
- How to initiate and effectively resource staff training and professional development
- The need to take a holistic approach
- Key research needs.
The critical issues identified for consideration were:

1. **How to position English language development as a core, rather than marginal, teaching and learning issue**
   The Government-led standards-based approach to higher education and TEQSA’s early focus on English language proficiency mean that higher education institutions will be obliged to directly address this question.

   There is consensus among scholars and researchers that English language development is best achieved by embedding it within the teaching of the relevant discipline (Discussion Paper 2, p.52). However, few higher education institutions have embraced this approach at an institutional or policy level.

   Whatever the approach taken by individual institutions, the sector as a whole needs to consider how it can transform student language development into a core teaching and learning issue and develop strategies endorsed by the sector for enhancing, assessing, monitoring and evaluating students’ English language use.

2. **How to measure and/or monitor student language development**
   How can institutions and disciplinary areas establish a framework or set of standards that explicitly identify expected student language ‘levels’ or ‘outcomes’ at stages of a higher education course?

   This question is likely to emerge as a key issue in the current environment, yet there is comparatively little discussion of the question in the current literature.

3. **How to initiate and effectively resource staff training and professional development**
   Any major changes in staff roles that result from reconceptualising the positioning of English language development will require that disciplinary staff undertake professional development to equip themselves for their new tasks and to ensure staff understand and can act successfully on the centrality of English language competence for all students. The role, positioning and professional development of Language and Learning Advisors (LLAs) within institutions will also need to be considered and enhanced since they will have a major role to play in collaborating and advising disciplinary staff. Institutions may need to reconsider the current positioning of LLAs “at the margins of academic life”.

4. **The need to take a holistic approach**
   The recent literature on internationalisation, on widening participation, on pastoral care and on the language development of all students broadly espouses a single guiding philosophy that resonates across all these areas of interest. The evidence suggests that institutions would benefit from ‘joining the dots’ between the internationalisation agenda, the promotion of student well being, the education of diverse groups of students and student language growth. Different areas in institutions will need to be brought together constructively at the level of both policy and practice to benefit all students.

5. **Key research needs**
   While much research has been published in the field of in-course student English language assessment and development since the 2007 Symposium and while studies on embedding language development in the disciplines have been particularly fruitful, most of the research is comparatively small-scale and short-term. There is now a need for more longitudinal, large, inter-institutional research studies.

   Other specific areas where further research would be beneficial are: post-entry language assessment, optimal forms of language development activity, specialised credit-bearing language development units and peer learning.
With international students placing growing importance on acquiring post-study work experience, English language competency in the context of graduate employment has become an increasingly important issue for Australian universities. Employers increasingly include English language skills and communication skills under the broad banner of employability skills.

An examination of the literature reveals that employers both in Australia and other countries place great importance on English language and communication skills when recruiting graduates. However, many employers harbour concerns over the English language ability of international graduates and believe more needs to be done to improve the language and communication skills in order to prepare them for employment.

Employers have high expectations of all graduates. Employers are looking for graduates who have a confident command of English and who are comfortable expressing their ideas freely in a team environment. Written communication skills are also highly valued by employers. At the same time, many of the professional bodies see employability skills as key factors in successful labour market integration. Professional bodies also tend to express concern over the standard of English competency among domestic graduates.

A series of key and interrelated issues emerge from this context:

### Key issues

- Defining what is meant by English language proficiency
- Setting a standard of English language proficiency at exit
- Measuring proficiency through a exit testing and/or a combination of other approaches
- Other approaches to supplement exit testing
- The role of English language proficiency in access to and success in Work Integrated Learning experiences and the transition to work, in effective performance in vocational field and trades and in the transition to further study?
- Priority research needed to answer these questions.

Setting a standard of English language proficiency at exit

“Few measures are in place to ensure that graduating students have attained a level of proficiency that employers will accept”  
Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth and Harris 2011

Setting a standard of English language proficiency at exit is problematic both conceptually and practically. What standard should be set? A level commensurate with that of a native speaker would have theoretical (what is “native speaker” level?) as well as practical implications (what of domestic “non-native” speakers? Would far fewer international students obtain an Australian qualification?).

Universities do not currently have agreed means for setting a standard of English language competence for graduation and it has been suggested that desired outcomes from tertiary study have been largely driven by Graduate Skilled Migration requirements set by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) – “an acute case of the tail wagging the dog”. The higher education sector should probably seek to reclalm the agenda on language outcomes.

Suggestions by institutions include specifying outcomes based on standardised test scores (e.g. an IELTS score of 7.5), but this raises the issue of how standards might be arrived at and who should be setting them. It also raises the question whether current views are based on an understanding of proficiency levels or on an aspirational view of a particular score as the holy grail of ELP due to minimum standards required for professional registration and migration.
Defining what is meant by English language proficiency

Definitions and terminology related to English language proficiency pose challenges and there has been a tendency to rely on test scores to describe proficiency levels. There is no agreed definition either of the concept itself or of desirable proficiency levels. Development of definitions to describe the competencies that employers are looking for in international graduates really requires a clearer understanding of what is being measured – are we chiefly concerned with discipline-specific academic English, the language skills required for employment, or both?

Exit testing

Exit testing is not currently widespread in Australia and the research is therefore rather limited. What is undertaken tends to focus on IELTS testing. Much of the research is in-house and not published. That being said, it is clear that international students show a strong tendency to access exit testing for migration rather than for educational purposes.

There are pros and cons of exit testing. On the positive side, using a standardised test can provide a consistent cross-program or cross-institutional method of assessing and documenting graduating ELP. Test scores can also be provided as evidence of ELP to employers and professional bodies. Exit testing also allows institutions to offer a value-added graduate attainment, possibly as a point of differentiation. Additionally, the findings from exit testing allow institutions to gather local quantitative evidence that may be used to inform aspects of ELP policy and practice.

On the negative side, a one-off test has limited capacity in comparison to the cumulative evidence that is gathered over the course of a degree. Testing in itself will not develop language competence, which occurs cumulatively across the study period. Testing is likely to have little effect on levels of ELP unless the outcomes impact the right to graduate, and research studies into generic high-stakes testing indicate that this may be detrimental to learning.

The literature also suggests that assessing skills within the discipline (whether academic literacy, graduate attributes or ELP) may be a more effective approach. An ethical question might also be raised about whether it is appropriate to require students to demonstrate ELP at the end of a course when they have successfully completed an award course that was taught and assessed in English. Finally, a main area of concern is based around validity. Large-scale proficiency tests were not originally designed for this use and may also be called into question on ethical grounds.

Exit testing might in fact be used best as one component in a broader set of initiatives. A more nuanced approach might include for example statements of proficiency or language portfolios based on frameworks for describing language standards. Other options would be to build expectations of English language proficiency into assessment criteria with progressive standards across qualifications or to develop capstone experiences aimed to evidence the culmination of technical disciplinary skills, academic language and learning skills and employability skills (Discussion Paper 3, p.75).

English language proficiency and the transition to further study

The limited research related specifically to the ELP of postgraduate EAL students suggests that they experience similar language difficulties to undergraduates. There is a paucity of research into the exiting outcomes of this cohort. Little is known about whether students are linguistically prepared for postgraduate study or whether the location (onshore or offshore), the medium of instruction or the discipline of the first degree impact language standards. Nor is the impact known of “language of instruction” policies, which mean that students who have undertaken adequate prior learning in English are exempt from evidencing ELP by formal means. More research needs to be undertaken in relation to postgraduate language standards in particular.

English language proficiency and Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Current research in Australia and overseas suggests students who undertake relevant work experience during their degree are more employable on graduation. Studies in Australia suggest that poor English language and communication skills are preventing many international students from accessing work integrated learning (WIL) programs. University staff are reluctant to place international students who do not meet acceptable language standards for fear of damaging important relationships with industry. International students are frequently the student group who are likely to benefit most from a WIL placement; however, under-developed communication skills seriously impact on their capacity to participate.
This is likely to be an instance of a broader problem. Employers mostly have not articulated the language requirements for their workplaces/professions and often what employers perceive as poor or insufficient English language skills may actually be the lack of work-specific communication skills. The reasons international students are less successful in gaining work integrated learning and internship opportunities or are perceived to be less successful in workplace participation is not well researched.

**Key research needs**

Despite the heightened focus on English language proficiency at the completion of studies since the 2007 symposium, pressing research questions remain, including:

- How might we best conceptualise “English language proficiency”?  
- What is the validity of standardised tests for assessing English language proficiency at the point of exit from tertiary study?  
- How might exiting English language proficiency at the completion of study be best evidenced?  
- How might realistic exit standards for English language proficiency be set and how might English language proficiency be better integrated into graduate attribute statements and related policy?  
- What role does English language proficiency play in access to and success in (i) Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences and the transition to work, (ii) in effective performance in vocational field and trades and (iii) in the transition to further study?
FINDINGS OF THE BREAKOUT GROUPS

In depth discussion around key questions occurred in six breakout groups. The groups were given a shared set of three main questions to consider and respond to:

1. What are the three most critical issues that need to be addressed?
2. What should be done to address these?
3. What priority research is needed to inform practice?

Groups were asked to identify and prioritise the way forward and highlight implications for students, institutions, standards bodies, governments, and employers.

The key decisions of the breakout groups are summarised below:

Critical issues

- Integrate into and embed English language development in institutional strategic plans, policies and curricula
- Ensure adequate staff professional development
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of English language professional staff (e.g., Academic Language and Learning staff) and academic staff and build effective working relations between them
- Identify best practice (what works?)
- Ensure English language proficiency is appropriately described in the threshold standards
- Recognise the motivations of students to improve their English language proficiency and work with students to gain their commitment
- Agree common key messages and communicate these consistently
- Maximise the use of scarce institutional resources by fostering collaboration and integration of efforts within and between institutions and across education sectors.

What can be done to best address these?

- Establish English language proficiency frameworks relevant to the three stages of a student’s tertiary study – entry, in-course and exit
- Benchmark activities between the sectors
- Ensure that programs are geared to achieving outcomes that employers and students want
- Develop and extend the good practice principles both to take account of the new standards approach and into the non-university sectors
- Drive solutions at a practitioner level
- Share best practice
- Australian government to adopt an agenda (strategy and programs) to ensure Australia is a linguistically competent country
- Standards agencies to drive positive changes by encouraging institutions to adopt progressive practices
- Institutional leadership to stress English language proficiency for all students as a strategic institutional priority and to communicate and resource this throughout their institution.

Priority research needs

- Research into what non-institutional stakeholders (students and employers) mean by English language competence, their expectations and how best to engage them
- Include students (e.g., through CISA) and professional bodies in the design of the English language proficiency research agenda
■ Research into good practice (what initiatives work?) building on what is known, including identifying and disseminating good practice case studies to achieve academic buy in, and including the use of examples for other countries

■ More longitudinal research studies involving comparisons between different student groups (domestic, EAL and international students)

■ Agree on the metrics for undertaking larger scale and valid tracking studies via different entry channels, drawing on rigorous schools and VET reporting requirements

■ Share and disseminate research findings.

Summary of key findings

In terms of priorities there was strong support for:

■ Researching, identifying and disseminating best practice in regard to enhancing English language proficiency covering institutional strategy, policy, curriculum and learning and teaching.

■ Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of English language professional and academic staff and building more effective working relations between them.

■ Recognising the motivations and expectations of students and employers and involving them through all the stages of activity from research design and conduct through to program design, delivery, evaluation and improvement.

While additional resources to meet strategic objectives for enhanced English language proficiency among all students are likely to be needed, there is agreement that significant improvements can be achieved within existing resources through improved understanding of what works and through sharing experiences and initiatives between institutions and across education sectors.
SUMMARY OF KEY ACTIONS

The aim of the symposium was to consider evidence about the efficacy of Australian policy and practice in the area of English language preparation, support and competence of international students with a view to identifying actions needed to enhance current knowledge and practice.

A number of key messages and outcomes emerged. These reflect the considered views of industry about how policy and practice reflecting English language competence of international students should be viewed and further enhanced. For the most part, they are widely and strongly supported and are a clear pointer to future action, at institutional, sector and industry-wide levels.

The key messages and outcomes are contained in the three discussion papers and in this final report, which summarises the main points. These resources should be read in conjunction with one another. They are available online at www.ieaa.org.au.

Institutional and program priorities

- Clarify the roles and responsibilities and build effective working relations between English language professional staff and academic staff.
- Develop enrolment practices in the university sector for entry to individual courses that consider English language and academic ability.
- Incorporate English language within learning analytics in universities, to enable monitoring of students from diverse entry pathways.
- Position English language development as a core rather than marginal teaching and learning issue in part to address the challenge of meeting threshold standards for English language competence for all students. Work holistically to develop policy and practice initiatives integrating the institutional internationalisation agenda, the promotion of student well being, the education of diverse groups of students and student language growth.
- Initiate the measurement and monitoring of student language development.
- Address professional development to ensure staff understand and can act successfully on the centrality of English language competence for all students.
- Investigate the efficacy of building English language proficiency into assessment criteria and into capstone courses and experiences.
- Consider measuring English language proficiency through assessment of language portfolios along the lines of the European Language Portfolio.

Quality assurance and good practice

- Revise the University Good Practice Principles (GPPs) to align them with the current focus on threshold standards and learning outcomes.
- Extend the GPPs to other sectors (VET and schools).
- Develop a language standards framework that provides incremental goals throughout the duration of a course.

Key research priorities

- A priority research agenda to be determined in consultation with industry, students, governments and with Australian employer and professional groups.
- Identify and disseminate best practice in English language proficiency covering institutional strategy, policy, curricula and learning and teaching.
- Research the motivations and expectations of students and employers and how best to engage them at all stages from research design and conduct through to program design, delivery, evaluation and improvement.
- Design and implement comparable research on the extent to which different English language pathways prepare international students for their subsequent studies, including more and better large-scale system-wide studies tracking the performance of international students entering institutions.
■ Research to track the academic outcomes of cohorts of students who enter via various pathways. Benchmarking data within and between sectors would be particularly valuable.

■ Conduct a meta-analysis of research evidence about the extent to which English language test scores at entry predict future academic performance of international students is needed to assist institutional decision making and better inform entry requirements.

■ Conduct more longitudinal, large, inter-institutional research studies in the area of in-course student English language development. Specific areas where further research would be beneficial are: embedding English language development in the disciplines, post-entry language assessment, optimal forms of language development activity, specialised credit-bearing language development units and peer learning.

■ Research into the English language proficiency needs of postgraduate students and postgraduate English language proficiency standards.

■ Research into the validity of standardised tests for assessing English language proficiency at the point of exit from tertiary study.

■ Research into how exiting English language proficiency might be best evidenced.

■ Research into how realistic exit standards for English language proficiency might be set and how English language proficiency might be better integrated into graduate attribute statements and related institutional policy.

■ Research into the role English language proficiency plays in access to and success in Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences and the transition to work.

■ Research into the role English language proficiency plays in effective performance in vocational field and trades.

■ Research into the role English language proficiency plays in the transition to further study.

Cooperation and collaboration

■ Foster and facilitate increased cooperation between stakeholders to carry out research across priority issues.

■ Foster and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experiences and the dissemination of findings of research, innovations and good practice among institutions and sectors to strengthen standards and to improve quality.

■ Foster and facilitate cooperation and collaboration between education institutions, student groups, employers and professional bodies to work together to help identify the types of communications skills needed, leading to the design of curricula and pedagogical strategies to help students develop these.

Resources

■ Key stakeholders to invest the resources required to carry out the actions above and to ensure quality outcomes are delivered to international students and to the wider community.

Information and public relations needs

■ Identification and use of a common place in which to store, access and disseminate information about good practice.

■ Mechanisms to be found to pro-actively communicate to a wider public the evidence in respect of English language competence of international students.
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  The University of Melbourne

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Participating organisations

- Australian Council for Educational Research
- ACT Education and Training Directorate
- ANU College
- Australian Catholic University
- Australian Computer Society
- Australian Education International
- Australian Government Schools International
- Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA)
- Australian National University
- Australian Skills Quality Authority
- Cambridge English Language Assessment
- Canberra Institute of Technology
- Charles Sturt University
- Council of International Students Australia (CISA)
- CPA Australia
- CQU University Australia
- Curtin College (Navitas University Programs)
- Curtin University
- Deakin University
- Department of Business and Innovation, Victoria
- Department of Education, Tasmania
- Edith Cowan University
- English Australia
- ETS TOEFL
- Flinders University
- Griffith University
- IDP Education Australia
- IELTS
- IES (UQ Foundation)
- International Education Association of Australia
- James Cook University
- John Paul College
- La Trobe University
- Macquarie University
- Monash University
- Murdoch University
- Navitas English
- Navitas University Programs
- NEAS
- NSW Department of Education & Communities
- Pearson
- Queensland University of Technology
- RMIT University
- Southern Cross University College
- Strategy Policy & Research in Education Pty Ltd
- Studygroup
- Swinburne University of Technology
- TAFE NSW - Sydney Institute
- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)
- The University of Adelaide
- The University of Melbourne
- The University of New England
- The University of New South Wales
- The University of Newcastle
- The University of Queensland
- The University of Sydney
- The University of Western Australia
- Universities Australia
- University of Ballarat
- University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations
- University of Canberra
- University of South Australia
- University of Southern Queensland
- University of Tasmania
- University of Technology Sydney
- University of Western Sydney
- University of Western Sydney College
- University of Wollongong
- Victoria University
- WAPETIA
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This discussion paper investigates the research evidence about the English language preparedness of international students and their selection for entry to tertiary study in Australia, in universities and VET.

The paper identifies and weighs up the recent research and focuses on the critical issues now facing students, education institutions, standards agencies, governments, business groups and professional bodies around this complex topic. It takes account especially of the changed context facing tertiary education, in particular the establishment and emerging responsibilities of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) for threshold standards, including the particular focus on English language standards for all students.

This paper outlines critical issues concerning English language requirements for post-secondary study. These include:

- Revising the GPPs to align them within the current focus on threshold standards and learning outcomes.
- Extending the GPPs to other sectors, especially private higher education, public and private VET and if appropriate schools.
- Developing enrolment practices which consider English language and academic ability for entry to courses.
- Implementing comparable research across schools, VET and higher education to establish a strong evidence-base to inform practices.
- Incorporating English language within the increasing use of learning analytics in universities, to enable monitoring of students from diverse entry pathways.

In summary, increased accountability through TEQSA and ASQA, and the introduction of learning and teaching standards means that tertiary institutions need to become better at assessing, monitoring and evaluating English language learning outcomes. English language entry requirements have an important and vital role to play within this context. We have made some progress in this since the 2007 Symposium, but more research is needed to better inform policy and practice.
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INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency has become an important issue in Australian higher education due in part to a heightened awareness of the role of English language ability in employment outcomes and the role of international graduates in meeting skill shortages in the Australian workforce. There is also an increased recognition within higher education institutions of the fundamental nature of language in learning and academic achievement for all students.

There is increased focus on the issue particularly with the emerging responsibilities of Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) for threshold standards, including English language standards for all students. International students are frequently the primary focus of this conversation, but given the diversity of the Australian student community it is crucial to understand and to act on the understanding that English language proficiency is relevant for all students (AUQA 2009, p.2.)

Background, context and purpose

As with the other discussion papers for the present Symposium, this paper attempts to identify and address priority issues that have emerged since the 2007 Symposium, drawing on the research evidence. The 2007 Symposium was a landmark event. Its deliberations and its findings led to heightened and widespread understanding amongst all stakeholders – students, education institutions, regulatory authorities, and business and professional groups - about the complex issues involved. It subsequently led to concerted thinking and action on the part of researchers, education institutions, quality assurance agencies and by governments. In particular, in 2008-09 it led to the commissioning by the Australian Government and the development by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) of Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities (Appendix 1).

The context in which the discussion is now taking place is difference from that of five years ago. The impact of the Good Practice Principles is being felt within the sector (see below) and research into the issues has developed significantly. As Discussion papers 2 and 3 in this series amply demonstrate, our understandings about the complex of issues, policies and practices have expanded significantly over the last five years.

Of course, the external context has not remained fixed. Since 2007 there have been a number of developments that have reshaped the tertiary education landscape. These include the Bradley Review of Higher Education, the Baird and Knight Reviews of ESOS and of Student Visas respectively, the Base Funding Review, a series of VET related reviews, a Senate Enquiry into the Welfare of International Students, Review of Visa Assessment Levels, the Asian Century White Paper and the International Education Advisory Council’s immanent International Education Strategy for Australia - to name just a few.

Within this broader context the issue of English language proficiency of international students is receiving increased attention in terms of regulation and compliance. The most significant regulatory imposts are:

1. Streamlined visa processing requirements for universities (and the consideration of the extension of SVP to the VET sector);

2. New Migration Regulations requiring universities to present annual “University Plans” to Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) covering a range of matters including English language assessment and maintenance strategies, and much more besides;

3. The requirement under the ESOS Act 2000 for private education institutions to pay the risk component of the Tuition Protection Service (TPS) Levy; and

4. Proposed revised version of the National Code, ostensibly to better link it to the ESOS Act.

The definition of “English language proficiency” adopted for the paper is that given in the AUQA Good Practice Principles: “the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies. Such uses may range from a simple task such as discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience. This view of proficiency as the ability to organize language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of “English language proficiency” from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure”.

While under the Higher Education Support Act 2003, universities, public VET institutions and schools may be exempt from paying the risk component of the Levy, they are obliged to pay the administrative component.

The revision was due for release in January 2013 but is held up and will now take the form of a Discussion Paper to allow for consultation before implementation.
In addition, there is continued media interest and coverage about English language levels of international students, at entry and at graduation:

Overseas students lag on job-ready English. Overseas students who start with competent English are unlikely to graduate with the professional command of the language needed to get jobs, according to new research (Bernard Lane, The Australian 18 July 2012). Australia is not alone. In 2012 the Times Higher Education Supplement reported that “nearly two in three UK universities are setting English language requirements below the recommended level for undergraduate students from outside the European Union…58 of the 88 universities that responded to a THE Freedom of Information request say that their “standard minimum” requirement for undergraduates is 6.0, which IELTS says is “probably acceptable” for students on “linguistically demanding” training courses such as air traffic control, but not academic programmes (THES 23 August 2012).

Soft marking also gets occasional coverage, frequently construed as a sign of lax English language entry requirements:

Australian universities have been battling accusations their entry requirements for international students are too low – and in some cases, lecturers are too lenient on foreign pupils. Soft marking, or lenient marking standards for international students with weaker English, is a taboo topic… (Grace Yew, MELD Magazine, 29 October 2012)

With these issues setting the contextual scene, the Symposium aims to draw on the current research to critically review progress, assess achievements and consider the evidence and good practice that will assist education institutions to make decisions about how best to enhance the English language proficiency and the learning outcomes of international students.

The present discussion paper revisits and updates the issues and findings of the earlier Discussion Paper on this topic re-examines the conclusions reached regarding preparation and selection by the 2007 Symposium; reviews the AUQA Good Practice Principles relevant to preparation and selection; identifies gaps in research and proposes some issues for consideration by the current symposium.
The 2007 Discussion Paper (O’Loughlin and Murray, 2007) drew attention to a number of key findings relevant to preparation and selection, including:

- There is a lack of appreciation of the variety and complexity of pathway programs (onshore and offshore) and of the wide variety of risks and benefits associated with different pathway programs.
- There are no common exit English standards for pathway programs.
- In many instances, international students may enter schools, VET and higher education institutions via pathway programs without completing a formal test of English.
- Receiving institutions frequently use pathway programs to suit a variety of institutional needs. As a selection tool pathways are used to assess academic achievement, but also to measure English language proficiency at designated, sometimes variable, threshold levels. This conflation of purposes and measures is problematic.
- The distinction between the assessment of proficiency and achievement in relation to English language is not well understood by receiving institutions (IELTS and similar large-scale validated testing instruments are tests of English proficiency. “Direct entry” ELT and Foundation courses have a primarily achievement focus). An assessment of language proficiency is a judgment of an individual’s overall ability in the language concerned with the aim of predicting how well she or he will cope within a particular course using English-medium instruction. An achievement assessment is a judgment about how well an individual has mastered the knowledge and skills learned in a particular course of study.
- An IELTS band score of 6.0 does not necessarily mean the student is equipped with the skills required to undertake formal study in, for example, a university degree. There are advantages and disadvantages in referring to formal tests scores.
- The commercial, proprietary nature of standardised tests (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL) undermines the ability of students and institutions to compare test scores on different tests. This raises serious questions about the ability of receiving institutions to quality assure and be fair and equitable in their use of different test scores for selection purposes. Public confidence in the comparability of test scores is undermined.
- Research on IELTS and TOEFL tests scores as predictors of academic success tend to be equivocal in their findings. (see also p.18 below).
- English language test scores alone do not predict academic success.
- The very few large scale Australian and UK tracking studies that exist tend to suggest that international students may be less likely to achieve upper level passes at the degree level and that English language difficulties may be an issue at this level.
- There is a need for better, large scale tracking studies of the performance of international students who have undertaken a wide variety of English language pathways.
- There is no accepted assessment framework to determine language progression or learning outcomes in place in the ELT sector in Australia or in the equivalent sectors in Australia’s competitor countries such as the UK.

The majority of these points remain relevant today. There is however, greater awareness amongst institutions and standards bodies about the potential for international students entering via some pathways to do so without completing a formal English language test.

The 2007 Symposium recognised that the issues of English language proficiency of international students are complex and involve challenges both to understanding and to action. Addressing these issues was seen as crucial for the long-term quality and sustainability of Australia’s international education sector. While this was viewed as a shared responsibility of all key stakeholders and all sectors, it is education institutions particularly who should take the primary responsibility and who should lead the way. There was also an abiding perception that education institutions do not approach the English language skills of international students with the same rigor they use to assess academic achievement.
There was a strong desire for maintaining effective quality assurance at a broadly national level (including for offshore programs) and for cooperative action by all stakeholders to tackle shared problems, to strengthen Australia’s reputation and position in international education generally.

The need for focused priority research about pathways and entry to better understand the scale of the issues involved and to evaluate the comparability and effectiveness of different pathways was also confirmed. And there was a strong view that if the international education sector is to be sustained for the future key stakeholders would need to invest the resources to deliver quality outcomes. These calls have been acted on to some extent since 2007 but there are significant gaps and actions to be addressed.

‘English language proficiency’ is not only a high profile impactor of quality for individual international students. It is also increasingly used as a high profile form of shorthand to make statements about the quality of education providers overall. But it is an imperfect indicator to stand for the quality of education provision (Vi McLean).
One direct consequence of the 2007 Symposium was the Good Practice Principles for English language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities (GPPs) (Appendix 1). The GPPs are general statements relating to how universities can address the English language needs of international students. They formed part of the AUQA quality audits and in this sense had some influence over universities reviewing their policies and practices around this issue. Their development effectively demonstrated the commitment and leadership of Australian universities in the area of English language proficiency for international students. While the GPPs by their very commissioning were framed with international students in mind, they also explicitly stated that they “can be applied more generally to learning and teaching of all higher education students and they can be used by other post-secondary educational institutions” (AUQA 2007, p. 1). Unfortunately, it appears that limited efforts to apply the GPPs outside universities have occurred, possibly because the GPPs are not well known beyond the university sector. It is probably necessary not only to revisit and revise the GPPs for universities, to align better with the current focus on threshold standards and learning outcomes but additionally to promote and extend their usefulness to other sectors, especially private higher education, public and private VET and, where appropriate, schools.

Focus on entry

While emphasising the development of English language proficiency throughout the whole of the student life cycle – entry, in-course and exit - the GPPs had a particular focus on entry, within the context both of widening participation across tertiary education and the increasing numbers of international students, and a recognition that different disciplines have different discourses of academic inquiry (AUQA 2007, p. 2).

Three of the ten GPPs (1, 3 and 4) directly address the responsibilities of universities and of international students with respect to assessment of international students English language proficiency for entry (two others – 7 and 10 – are indirectly linked).

Principle 1
Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies.

This overarching principle reflected the fact that English language entry standards form part of admission criteria and that universities themselves set entry standards for admission designed to allow most students to graduate, if the students engage diligently with their studies.

Principle 3
Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and should be advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment.

This Principle reflects mutuality in development of English language proficiency. While universities have responsibilities to set entry standards and provide means for students to develop their English language proficiency during their studies, students must also take responsibility for their own language development while at university, as part of taking responsibility for their learning.

Principle 4
Universities ensure that the English language entry pathways they approve for the admission of students enable these students to participate effectively in their studies.

In practice, this means that universities need to monitor how well students from different entry pathways are able to deal with the language requirements of their discipline at various levels of study and further develop their proficiency. Universities need to ensure that their expectations are conveyed clearly to pathway providers.

This can pose significant challenges for universities in particular cases in that, while there are limitations on the extent to which universities will feel able to change their English language admission requirements for some groups, e.g. school leavers and students articulating from vocational education and training (VET) providers, universities are enjoined by this Principle to make known any concerns about the English language proficiency of students admitted through these pathways. It is doubtful whether universities have actively pursued this course.

5 A small number of private VET and higher education providers (e.g. Navitas and Think Education) however are interpreting and making use of the GPPs for their purposes, actions that other private providers should probably emulate.
6 This responsibility stems from the National Code Standard 2 under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000, which stipulates that ‘registered providers ensure (international) students’ qualifications, experience and English language proficiency are appropriate for the course for which enrolment is sought’. This requirement is also relevant to Principle 4.)
Import and utility of the GPPs

Since their release the GPPs have been subject to much discussion and some criticism. Many universities have attempted to come to grips with them in principle and in practice, driven partly by their potential use by quality agencies for audit purpose (GPP, p. 3).

Some commentators have remarked that while the impetus for the development of the GPPs was the public concern over university entry standards articulated in the Australian media and based on the highly critical work of Birrell (2006), the GPPs are largely directed not at entry so much as at the development of students’ language capabilities over the duration of their study (Harper, Prentice and Wilson, 2011, p. 7). The focus on entry is seen as “fairly circumspect”. This is not valid. As discussed above, in addition to Principle 1 and Principle 4 that relate directly to entry, three other Principals (3, 7 and 10) apply directly or indirectly to the issue of entry. Moreover, the whole tenor and one of the major achievements of the GPPs, as of the 2007 Symposium itself, was to treat English language proficiency as a developmental phenomenon across all the phases of the student life cycle.

Criticisms of the GPPs have also pointed to a number of problematic “tensions” inherent in them – such matters as terminological/definitional problems in relation to “both explicit and implicit” understandings of “English language proficiency”; perceived equivocation about the student group to which the Principles are meant to apply (Murray 2010); and a perception of “conflicting discourses of inclusion and exclusion that speaks to us through its [the GPPs report’s] pages” (Harper, Prentice and Wilson, 2011).

Conceptual critiquing of the GPPs is understandable, necessary and welcome, not only for its own sake, to ensure validity and coherency in thought but also in an important practical sense. In part the critique is meant explicitly to alert institutions seeking to apply the GPP Report to the need for think through its meaning, validity and applicability within their particular institutional context. “The aim…is to offer universities (sic) points for discussion as they translate this complex report into practice” (Harper, Prentice and Wilson, p. 1).

That of course is the dual challenge – understanding the complex of issues in a conceptual sense but then translating concepts, ideas, and “principles” into valid and appropriate actions. The GPPs were never shaped to be laws on stone tablets. Rather, they were conceived as spurs to institutional thinking, to be considered and applied by universities as they would consider and apply any other guidelines on good practice in the context of their own operations and environment (GPPs, p. 3).

The Steering Group that formulated the GPPs was conscious of so called “inconsistencies” in the Principles in their applicability to all students as well as to international students. This was quite conscious on the part of the Steering Group. Indeed, GPP Report was particularly prescient on this point. It not only reflected the views of the 2007 Symposium that many of the issues addressed by the Symposium, and the solutions proposed, apply equally to all students (IEAA, 2007, p.12-14). It articulated the importance of extending the Principles to students generally. As described earlier (p.10), the context in which the GPPs were formulated dictated that the primary focus be on international students. Down the track we can see that the import of the GPPs includes the momentum they helped build up, leading to the development of threshold standards, including the particular focus on English language standards, for all students.
Entry standards of English language proficiency are an important and necessary part of a quality standards framework, which forms part of the tertiary education landscape in Australia. However, the terrain concerning these entry requirements is complex and difficult to navigate. There are a variety of types of English language entry pathways that students use to gain entry to tertiary education courses. This paper will present current research into English language entry requirements and discuss some of the implications for practice. In doing so, three issues emerge concerning the diverse English language requirements for tertiary study:

1. There is still limited empirical information regarding the extent to which the different forms of English language entry pathways prepare international students for their studies

2. English language requirements indicate that students have the required English language proficiency levels to commence rather than successfully complete their studies

3. There are very few studies that focus on the VET and schools sector.

Multiple pathways

In many quarters, including within the education sector, it is a commonly accepted myth that international students are required to gain a threshold score in a recognised English language test in order to gain entry to higher education. In fact there are multiple numbers and forms of evidence accepted by Australian education institutions as proof of English proficiency.

It is common for students to take a circuitous route to higher education entry, navigating different education sectors, including English medium secondary education, vocational education and training and English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS), delivered either onshore in Australia or offshore (Fig 1.).

Moreover, there are a plethora of other potential routes (Coley 1999, p.7–18).
While the presence of multiple pathways into higher education has many positive benefits for students and for institutions, there are drawbacks. One of the most significant is that not all pathways into higher education require students to provide formal evidence of their English language skills (O’Loughlin and Murray, 2007, p.10). The assumption here is that study in ELICOS, or in Australian schools or vocational education and training institutes for a set period automatically results in an improvement in English language skills, rendering students ready for higher studies (Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson, 2012, p. 19).

The diverse entry pathways means that it is difficult for institutions to know or be assured that students entering via these particular routes are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies. Indeed, it appears that that there is some doubt with respect to schools and VET pathways to higher education (see discussion below). Other research appears to confirm this for students entering through the schools sectors (Fox 2005). However, there is very little research available to draw any reliable and valid conclusions.

Proliferation of English language tests

The most widely used English language tests globally are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). These have been joined now by the UK based Cambridge ESOL test, the Certificate of Advanced English (CAE) and the US based Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE Academic). In the Australian context DIAC announced in 2011 that all four tests are acceptable for student visa assessment purposes.

The continued rapid growth in international student mobility worldwide means that additional tests of English language proficiency are likely to emerge to meet a market need. Diversity here, as in other spheres, is becoming the norm. For institutions and their staff, the proliferation and greater diversity of English language tests, together with the continuing difficulty in the absence of rigorous equivalency studies to agree the measures of equivalence for test scores on different tests (see below), means that determinations about suitable English language requirements and assessments of proficiency levels for entry are likely to become even more challenging than they currently are.

Comparability of test scores

While there are methodological challenges, attempts to demonstrate comparability of different test are mostly hampered by the proprietary nature of standardised tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. Test companies themselves undertake substantial research into the validity and reliability of test instruments. TOEFL for example has produced hundreds of peer reviewed research papers on various aspects of TOEFL testing, some of them involving Australian researchers.

In the Australian context the test companies whose tests have been accepted for purposes of student visa assessment have all been required by DIAC to undertake research to show equivalence with IELTS. ETS/TOEFL’s research is available at www.ets.org/toefl/institutions/scores/compare. Institutions are at liberty to decide how they use this research. Other test companies have undertaken similar research.

There have been efforts to employ other frameworks, such as the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages (2004). Such efforts underscore the point that “assessing language ability involves reference to the context in which language is used, the objectives users are trying to achieve, the actions they undertake to achieve these objectives and the knowledge and skills they make use of” (Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson, 2012, p. 25). Adding to the complexity is the fact that different people have different linguistic abilities and language learning is highly contingent on individual characteristics. The Council of Europe (2004, p. 17) itself acknowledges, “Any attempt to establish “levels” of proficiency is to some extent arbitrary”.

That having been said, levels B1 (Threshold), B2 (Vantage) and C1 (Effective operational proficiency) of the CEFR are the levels generally of interest for purposes of entry to higher education. The agencies behind the major standardised tests, IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge ESOL and Pearson have provided a means of understanding their test scores in relation to the CFER Reference levels. However, there is considerable breadth in the range of scores that equate to each of the CEFR reference levels, so much so that “it is impossible to determine the precise equivalence of different test scores in the absence of a rigorous study” (Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson, 2012, p. 27).

Moreover, the problem with the comparison of the major standardised test results with the CEFR frameworks are that different meanings can be given from different research perspectives to the word descriptions of the various CEFR levels. Interpretation of IELTS scores for example are more generous than for Pearson (PTE Academic) or TOEFL scores, whose equivalence results for CEFR are similar. IELTS appears not to publish research studies to back up the IELTS equivalences so it is not possible to know how they are arrived at.
The incommensurability of outcomes on the wide variety of English language tests raises serious questions about quality assurance in the use of a variety of test scores for selection purposes.

**Predictive ability of English test results**

There has been significant research conducted to investigate whether it is possible to predict academic performance from English test results. Clearly there is a major difficulty in reaching a conclusion about whether it is possible to predict academic performance from English test results given that academic performance is influenced by a large range of factors, language proficiency being just one of them.

The reliance of institutions on IELTS, TOEFL and other test results to ascertain English language proficiency of prospective students raises both ethical and practical issues (O’Loughlin, 2011). For one thing, there is little evidence that English language test scores predict an individual’s success in an English medium study environment. For another, different courses of study have very different linguistic demands. “Taken together, these factors ensure that placing great weight on a numerical test result, one that is already a composite of a number of discrete scores for different linguistic skills, is a risky business. Even so, it is an activity that admission staff undertake on a regular basis.” (Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson, 2012, p. 28).

Some guidance is needed. Bayliss and Ingram, (2006) identify a number of studies that have found a positive relationship between IELTS band scores and subsequent academic performance and others that have not. There is a degree of equivocation around the research findings. Lee and Green (2007) concur, suggesting that other factors such as students’ background knowledge of and familiarity with the style of teaching are critical factors in determining academic success. Wait and Gresset (2009) suggest that the predictive ability of English test scores may be dependent on the field of study that students enter (Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson 2012, p. 29). The research seems to indicate that any relationship between English scores and subsequent academic performance is influenced by a host of factors. The English score alone is not a reliable predictor.

The “ideal” response to this by institutions might be to seek broad evidence of English language proficiency through examples of written work and the like and the use of interviews to supplement other judgments based on test scores. Given the scale of admissions processes in universities this is clearly impracticable.

In the absence of such actions it is imperative that institutional staff understand that the use of a single test score to determine the likelihood of a students subsequent success in their studies is a blunt tool (Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson 2012, p.30). And if a single test score is used, other actions are called for both by the institution and by the students concerned. A single score is not a threshold to be achieved, so much as one step on a longer developmental path. The implications of this for policy and practice are considered in the other two Discussion papers for the present Symposium.

**Post-entry academic performance of international students from pathway programs**

As mentioned above there has been significant research conducted to investigate whether it is possible to predict academic performance from English test results. However, there have been very few large-scale system-wide studies tracking the performance of international students entering institutions through the diverse of pathway programs. Almost all existing large-scale studies focus on the university sector. There is a dearth of research information available for VET and schools. This was true in 2007 (O’Loughlin and Murray, 2007; Arkoudis and Starfield 2007) and continues to be the case”.

Analysis of higher education statistics carried out by the Australian Universities International Directors’ Forum (AUIDF) has found that overall there was no significant difference between the academic performance of Australian and international students in the courses/units attempted (most recently Olsen, 2012, p 12). The AUIDF analysis however does not consider the language background of the students.

At the level of individual institutional research, there was some reference during the 2007 Symposium to studies in the UK and Australia that showed international students may be less likely to achieve upper level passes at the degree level (Arkoudis and Starfield, 2007; Morrison et al, 2005; University of Technology Sydney ELSSA Centre, 2001). But again the evidence does not appear to be unequivocal. There appear to be a number of institutional level studies tracing the academic performance of international students post entry. These

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7 The Illuminate Consulting Group PRISMS (Student Data Attributes) system purports to be the first attempt globally to focus on “student-institution mismatches, academic underperformance, high attrition rates and difficulties to focus on talent”. It claims to use international students’ admissions and registrar data (e.g. gender, nationality, secondary leaving qualification, language test scores, study field, pathways, agent code, degree type – grades, graduation rates) and purports to involve a number of Australian universities (ref. www.illuminategroup.com). There are clearly significant methodological challenges in attempting this kind of analysis on a global scale (cf. AHELO). PRISMS is a commercial venture by a US company. The validity and value of PRISMS is as yet unproven.
are generally in-house studies, and their findings, some of which are likely to be sensitive academically and commercially, are generally unpublished and remain confidential to the institutions concerned.

The authors of the present paper have sought to identify and analyse the findings of such studies and have been permitted to view a number of them from a range of institutions in a number of different sectors. From examination of these in-house studies, and with some caveats, it is possible to reach some general conclusions.

The first caveat however is that the scope, motivations for and the methodologies of individual studies vary greatly, so that it is not possible to aggregate findings from individual studies into a single, valid, comprehensive picture. The second caveat is that the confidential nature of the studies involved means that the conclusions drawn are not verifiable by others through examination of the primary data.

Nevertheless, the following conclusions drawn from a small number of studies examined by the present authors appear to us to be justified:

1. Most studies appear to be being conducted by the receiving higher education institutions. Only one study could be identified conducted jointly by a private pathway provider and their higher education partners.

2. Some institutional studies extend back ten or more years indicating the strong commitment of some institutions for longitudinal data collection; an evidence base to routinely monitor the performance of students entering through a variety of pathways; and to base validation or development of institutional selection and admission policies on this evidence.

3. Most studies examine only the performance in the first year after entry. Few studies examined performance over the whole course of study.

4. Few studies attempted to isolate English language proficiency at entry as a single variable to investigate its role in subsequent academic performance.

5. Few studies measured performance of international students against the domestic cohort of students.

6. In a number of studies, in terms of overall first year performance (measured by accumulated grades) international students entering from Foundation programs performed better than direct entry international students. International students entering through the Year 12 school route performed relatively worst of the groups.

7. A number of studies measured “progression rates”8 of different groups. Again, these studies indicate that international Foundation students have the highest progression rates of all the groups. At the same time Foundation pathways students have lower attrition rates9 compared with the other groups.

8. When it comes to grades attained, in general international students coming through Foundation programs tend to gain more high-level grades (HD, D) than students coming through other pathways.

9. There is some variation between the performance of different student groups in different courses. However, for many courses Foundation pathway students nevertheless outperform all other groups.

10. One study examining performance over entire course lengths revealed remarkable consistency (i.e. no significant change) in the relative performance of the designated pathway groups over the duration of the courses concerned. The Foundation program group out performed all other pathway groups.

11. The private pathway provider study demonstrated comparable outcomes for their pathway international students in terms of GPA performance relative to international students entering through other routes in the same degree courses. In a small number of courses the private pathway students performed at a higher level than other groups of students. The comparison groups were not distinguished in any sophisticated way, but simply isolated as a single comparative group, illustrative the rather narrow, instrumental motivation for this research. Only passing attention to comparative grade levels was paid by the study, and then only to identify a particular instance where grades obtained by the pathway provider’s students in one institution exceeded those of the comparator groups.

8 Progression rates, are a widely accepted measure of “success” within the higher education sector and are based on a standard formula: Progression Rate = Load Passed/(Load Passed + Load Failed + Load Withdrawn) where load withdrawn relates to withdrawals after the DIISRTE census date.

9 Attrition rates are defined by DIISRTE as “the proportion of students commencing a Bachelor course in given year (x) who neither complete nor return in the following year”.

34 ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
Faced with the growing complexity of issues surrounding English language entry for tertiary study, what can institutions do? Arkoudis et al (2012) have argued that a nuanced, rather than a broad-brush approach to the selection and admission of international students, should be adopted by institutions, based on the linguistic demands of particular fields of study. They have identified a number of ways institutions might to enhance the selection and admission of international students:

- Admissions staff should be aware of the implications of the multiple pathways into higher education, and in particular that not all involve a formal or thorough assessment of English language proficiency.
- Institutions may wish to consider requiring students in particular pathways where English language proficiency is not assessed to take an English proficiency test.
- Institutions may wish to consider the use of supplementary indicators of English language proficiency to complement English language proficiency test scores.
- All staff involved in setting and administering English language requirements should be made aware of the meaning, limitations and relationship of test scores on different standardised tests, including their limited predictability for future academic performance.
- All institutions would be advised to establish processes to enable ongoing monitoring over time of student progress from different entry pathways to build up the evidence to monitor and if necessary review entrance requirements, not only into the institution but into particular study programs.
- It is incumbent on institutions to assume that however well an EAL student performs on an English language test, they will require some degree of support throughout their course of study if they are to graduate with optimal English language skills that will enable them to perform well in their chosen career. Rather than focusing on identifying English language levels as threshold levels for admission, institutions would be better advised to focus attention more on supporting the development of enhanced English language proficiency throughout students courses of study, involving the joint inputs of English language experts and academic domain experts (2012, pp.35 – 36).
CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined critical issues concerning English language requirements for post-secondary study. These include:

- Revising the GPPs to align them within the current focus on threshold standards and learning outcomes.
- Extending the GPPs to other sectors, especially private higher education, public and private VET and if appropriate schools.
- Developing enrolment practices which consider English language and academic ability for entry to courses.
- Implementing comparable research across schools, VET and higher education to establish a strong evidence-base to inform practices.
- Incorporating English language within the increasing use of learning analytics in universities, to enable monitoring of students from diverse entry pathways.

In summary, increased accountability through TEQSA and ASQA, and the introduction of learning and teaching standards means that tertiary institutions need to get better at assessing, monitoring and evaluating English language learning outcomes. English language entry requirements have an important and vital role to play within this context. We have made some progress in this since the 2007 symposium, but more research is needed to better inform policies and practices.

Questions for consideration

- What are the priorities for further research to examine the English competency needs and academic performance of international students going on to further study via pathways programs?
- Should each receiving institution insist upon a pre-requisite program of study such as an EAP course?
- What is the best way to improve confidence in the exit standards of the wide variety of pathway programs? For example, should exit performance from pathway programs include a formal test of English language proficiency or other verifiable evidence of English language proficiency?
- Should there be specific standards set for all programs that allow direct entry to receiving institutions?
- Is there a need for a common framework of standards for describing and/or assessing English proficiency at entry and exit from ELT courses?
REFERENCES


Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities

March 2009

Introduction

The project
The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) in 2008 funded a project to develop a set of good practice principles for English language proficiency in academic studies.

This project’s focus is international students studying in universities in Australia. However the Principles can be applied more generally to learning and teaching of all higher education students and they can be used by other post-secondary educational institutions.

The project was undertaken by a Steering Committee convened by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). A list of Steering Committee members is given on the last page of this document.

The project is a quality enhancement activity for the Australian university sector and reflects extensive work being undertaken in many Australian universities. It builds on the outcomes of a 2007 National Symposium commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training. (The outcomes from this Symposium, and the evidence-based background papers that informed discussions at the Symposium, are available from the Australian Education International website at www.aei.dest.gov.au.)

Definition of English language proficiency
For this project, ‘English language proficiency’ has been defined as the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies. Such uses may range from a simple task such as discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience. This view of proficiency as the ability to organise language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of ‘English language proficiency’ from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence
structure. The project Steering Committee recognises that in many contexts the terms ‘English language proficiency’ and ‘English language competence’ are used interchangeably.

**Context**

English language proficiency has become an important issue in Australian higher education due in part to a heightened awareness of the role of English language ability in employment outcomes and the role of international graduates in meeting skill shortages in the Australian workforce. There is also an increased recognition within universities of the fundamental nature of language in learning and academic achievement for all students.

The rapid progress of global higher education is prompting universities in other countries to address the complex issues of learning and teaching in multilingual environments. Given the current prevalence of English in work and professional fields internationally, many universities are seeking better ways for students whose first language is not English to develop their disciplinary English language proficiency through academic studies.

For the retention and academic success of international students in Australian universities, a range of skills and strategies (in particular, written and oral communication) need to be made visible, explicit, and accessible and, importantly, integrated within specific disciplinary contexts. The Good Practice Principles are one way to demonstrate the commitment and leadership of Australian universities in the area of English language proficiency for international students with English as an additional language.

While attending to university entry requirements, the Steering Committee has emphasised the development of English language proficiency throughout students’ studies. In doing so, the Steering Committee has been guided by a number of key ideas, as follows:

- With widening participation across tertiary education and the increasing numbers of international students, it can no longer be assumed that students enter their university study with the level of academic language proficiency required to participate effectively in their studies.
- Irrespective of the English language entry requirements of the university, most students, in particular those from language backgrounds other than English, will require English language development throughout the course of their studies.
- Different disciplines have different discourses of academic inquiry.
- Students’ English language proficiency can be developed through appropriate course design, supplemented where necessary by other developmental activity.
- Development of academic language and learning is more likely to occur when it is linked to need (e.g. academic activities, assessment tasks).
- English language proficiency is one part of the wider graduate attribute agenda since English language communication skills are crucial for graduate employment.
How will the Good Practice Principles be used?

The Good Practice Principles have been developed in consultation with Australian universities and other stakeholders. They aim to describe what is known about current good practice, taking into account the diversity of Australian universities.

The Principles are general statements for individual universities to address in the context of their own operations and environment.

As one university stated in its response to the consultation draft: ‘Because the missions, pedagogical approaches, and student populations at and within each university are increasingly diverse, the principles must be broad enough to allow for institutions to respond in ways appropriate to their particular situation’.

The expectation of the project Steering Committee is that universities will consider the Principles as they would consider other guidelines on good practice. As part of AUQA quality audits universities can expect to be asked about the way they have addressed the Principles, just as they are likely to be asked by AUQA auditors about their application of a range of other external reference documents for the university sector.

The examples of good practices given in the thematic guide are examples only and not intended to be prescriptive. They are provided to assist universities and other institutions in reviewing and improving their own activities.
Good Practice Principles

1. Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies.¹

2. Resourcing for English language development is adequate to meet students’ needs throughout their studies.

3. Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment.

4. Universities ensure that the English language entry pathways they approve for the admission of students enable these students to participate effectively in their studies.

5. English language proficiency and communication skills are important graduate attributes for all students.

6. Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods.

7. Students’ English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.

8. International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments.

9. International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus.

10. Universities use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve their English language development activities.

¹ For international students studying in Australia, it is a requirement of the National Code’s standard 2 under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 that ‘registered providers ensure students’ qualifications, experience and English language proficiency are appropriate for the course for which enrolment is sought’. This requirement is also relevant to Principle 4.
Thematic Guide with Explanation and Examples

Examples of good practices in relation to each of the 10 Principles are provided below under the following thematic areas:

1. University-wide Strategy, Policy and Resourcing
2. Prospective Students and Entry Standards
3. Curriculum Design and Delivery
4. Transition and Social and Academic Interaction
5. Quality Assurance

Theme 1: University-wide Strategy, Policy and Resourcing

Relevant Principles

Principle 1
Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies.

Principle 2
Resourcing for English language development is adequate to meet students’ needs throughout their studies.

Explanation

The first Good Practice Principle is an overarching general statement reflective of the fact that universities themselves set entry standards for admission to their courses (programs). Entry standards are designed to allow most students to graduate, if the students engage diligently with their studies. English language entry standards form part of admission criteria.

Universities also make decisions about the nature and extent of learning that students must demonstrate and therefore about the nature and extent of teaching and other learning activities to be provided. For students to be able to engage effectively in their academic studies in Australia, they must be able to communicate in English in a manner appropriate to these studies. It is assumed that academic studies in Australia necessarily involve ongoing development of students’ discipline-specific English language proficiency. If some or many students are not able to participate at an appropriate level in their studies for reasons associated with their English language proficiency, a university will need to consider how to change its practices to better develop this proficiency. No university can guarantee that each and every student will participate effectively in their academic studies but every university should take responsibility for ensuring that the students it admits do not face unreasonable expectations of English language proficiency.
The second Good Practice Principle reflects the view that, having taken decisions on the extent of development of discipline-specific (and more general) English language proficiency its student population requires, a university should provide sufficient resources for development of this proficiency. A university should be able to demonstrate how resources for English language development are allocated and how it knows whether or not these resources are adequate to meet requirements. This resourcing needs to consider the needs of research students as well as coursework students and take into account funding for data collection and analysis.

Examples of Good Practices

• The university acknowledges significant responsibility for the ongoing development of its students’ English language proficiency, while recognising that students play an active role developing their proficiency during their studies.

• The university has a policy that includes its goals for the development of English language proficiency for all students.

• The university has comprehensive plans to develop and monitor students’ English language proficiency throughout their studies up to the time of graduation and recognises that implementation of these plans involves a range of groups within the university.

• The university ensures there are adequate resources for qualified academic language and learning staff to assist academics to integrate language development into curricula and to provide other forms of individual and group support to students.

• The university is able to demonstrate an objective basis for the allocation of resources for English language development commensurate with need.

• The university provides professional development assistance for staff to increase their understanding of, or expertise in, the development of English language proficiency.
Relevant Principles

Principle 3
Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment.

Principle 4
Universities ensure that the English language entry pathways they approve for the admission of students enable these students to participate effectively in their studies.

Explanation

The third Good Practice Principle reflects mutuality in development of English language proficiency. While universities have responsibilities to set entry standards and provide means for students to develop their English language proficiency during their studies, students must also take responsibility for their own language development while at university, as part of taking responsibility for their learning. It is important that students are aware of this expectation before they commit to a course of study, so universities need to advise prospective students of their responsibilities while at university. Many Australian universities have charters of student rights and responsibilities but these may need to make more explicit reference to development of English language proficiency than at present.

The fourth Good Practice Principle refers back to Principle 1 and the fact that universities are able to determine their own requirements for admission*. Most universities provide for English language entry standards to be met by students through a variety of means, so many students with English as an additional language do not need to take a recognised test of English language proficiency to meet English language entry requirements. Given the practical impossibility of equating these other means with English language test scores, universities need to find other means to assure themselves that students entering through pathways (including articulation from other studies, completion of English language courses and foundation programs) are equipped to participate effectively in their studies. In practice, this means that universities need to monitor how well students from different entry pathways are able to deal with the language requirements of their discipline at various levels of study and further develop their proficiency. (Simple measures of aggregate academic performance by cohort may not provide sufficient information.) Universities need to ensure that their expectations are conveyed clearly to pathway providers. They need to manage their relationships with pathway providers effectively, including giving providers feedback on their performance and drawing attention to problems.

*While there may be limitations on the extent to which universities feel able to change their English language admission requirements for some groups, e.g. school

Australian Universities Quality Agency, Report to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra
leavers and students articulating from vocational education and training (VET) providers, universities should make known any concerns about the English language proficiency of students admitted through these pathways.

Examples of Good Practices

- The university provides information for prospective and admitted students about the need for further development of their English language proficiency and advises students about the ways in which this development is supported by the university.
- All students are advised of the nature and level of support that will be given to help them meet the expectations that are placed on them.
- There is clear communication of the university’s expectations for further development of students’ English language proficiency to onshore and offshore educational partners and agents.
- The university has formal English language entry standards that reflect the particular needs of each discipline. In setting such entry standards, the university has given consideration to international norms. The university regularly reviews its standards, taking into account external reference points, and makes changes as appropriate.
- English language entry standards are not considered in isolation but in the context of the developmental support that the university will provide, so that entry standards, the needs of the course and the support that is provided form a coherent whole.
- The university has explicit statements of the English language qualifications that it accepts as equivalent to particular test scores (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL).
- There are defined academic responsibilities for setting and reviewing entry standards.
- Staff and students understand what is signified by IELTS or TOEFL or similar language test results, including the strengths and limitations of these tests.
- The university systematically reviews the academic performance of students entering through different pathways or channels.
- The university has secure and documented processes to allow it to check and approve that entering students meet English language entry requirements, including the use of precedent databases. These processes are controlled by the university, involve more than a single individual and are subject to internal audit. Exemptions are given rarely and follow documented procedures.
- The university has clarified its expectations with direct entry pathway providers and there are formal contracts between the university and direct entry pathway providers.
- The university provides feedback to direct entry providers on the performance of student cohorts.
- The university has mechanisms to assure itself of the quality and relevance of pathway programs and the adequacy of assessment practices of pathway providers.
Relevant Principles

**Principle 5**
English language proficiency and communication skills are important graduate attributes for all students.

**Principle 6**
Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods.

**Principle 7**
Students’ English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.

Explanation

*The fifth Good Practice Principle recognises that when students graduate from an Australian university, they should possess the English language proficiency and communication skills to perform effectively in subsequent employment and professional activities and to engage in society more generally. The Principle holds equally for international students as for domestic students, especially as many graduates can expect to live and work in more than one country. This Principle is consistent with Australian universities’ statements of graduate attributes, which almost without exception mention communication skills as a desired attribute, and one that research shows is crucial for employment on graduation. English language proficiency is sometimes treated as a ‘taken for granted’ element in communication skills. By highlighting it in this Principle, the implications for university studies become clear.*

*The sixth Good Practice Principle acknowledges that different disciplines have different English language requirements and discourses and that most students do not enter university with ‘ready-made’ proficiency in the academic language of their discipline(s). It is based on a view that development of appropriate English language proficiency is more likely to occur when it is linked to need (e.g. discipline-specific academic activities, assessment tasks, practica).*

*This Principle draws on expert advice, emerging practice and the available evidence on how to develop students’ English language proficiency during their studies, taking account of the varying needs of students, especially students with English as an additional language. These sources indicate that while there is no single ‘best’ way to develop students’ English language proficiency, contextualisation within disciplines and integration of language development across the curriculum seem likely to be effective approaches. ‘Integration’ in this context means taking a holistic view across a discipline to address needs through a variety of means, including: embedding language development through curriculum design and assessment; workshops or*
credit-bearing units within a course; ‘adjunct’ workshops or sessions within a course; developing workplace communication through preparation for work placements and practica; and targeted individual or group support provided by academic language and learning experts. Similar ideas can be applied to support research students.

The seventh Good Practice Principle recognises that, irrespective of universities’ English language entry requirements, students now enter university with quite widely varying degrees of English language proficiency. Early assessment of students’ English language development needs means that students and staff identify these needs at a time when they can start to be addressed, rather than at a point when the stakes are much higher. At least 18 Australian universities are now adopting or examining tools for early diagnosis of students’ English language development needs. Consistent with Principle 3, this Principle also recognises that providing students with ongoing opportunities to self-assess their English language development needs encourages students to take responsibility for this development.

Examples of Good Practices

- Curricula, teaching and assessment practices are designed to develop discipline-specific English language proficiency as part of the standard learning expected within a course.
- English language proficiency and course learning outcomes are aligned.
- The university gives attention to all aspects of language proficiency in assessment methods, e.g. attention to listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- The university encourages and supports international students (and others) to undertake a diagnostic assessment of their development needs for English language proficiency at a very early stage of their studies.
- The university offers students opportunities to self-assess their language skills throughout their studies and to undertake developmental activities in response to the needs they identify.
- The university has a clear statement of the respective responsibilities of individual academics, course and unit coordinators and academic language staff for developing students’ English language proficiency.
- The university ensures that academic staff know how to access professional assistance for the development of curricula, assessment tasks and teaching to develop English language proficiency.
- The curriculum takes into account time for students to develop their English language capacity within overall expected student workloads.
- The university has considered how best to use work placements or practica to assist students to develop their English language proficiency in professional or employment settings.
- The university has considered ways for domestic and international students to demonstrate their English language proficiency to prospective employers, referees and other institutions.
Theme 4: Transition and Social and Academic Interaction

Relevant Principles

**Principle 8**
International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments.

**Principle 9**
International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus.

Explanation

The eighth Good Practice Principle aims to emphasise the role that effective academic and social acculturation can play in the development of international students’ English language proficiency. In particular, it is important for international students with English as an additional language to enter an environment where they have opportunities and encouragement to develop their English language skills in ways that boost their confidence and willingness to experiment with the use of language while also contributing to their socialisation to their chosen discipline. This Principle recognises the growing emphasis placed by Australian universities on transition and orientation to academic language and skills for entering students. While there are substantial orientation programs for international students entering Australian universities, these are less commonly discipline-specific and may not provide support for international students to plan for the development of their English language proficiency. Universities might consider how best to introduce international students to supportive and competent English language speakers at orientation, e.g. through ‘buddy’ or peer mentor schemes.

The ninth Good Practice Principle builds on the eighth Principle but focuses on the need for universities to develop effective strategies (not only ‘opportunities’) to ensure that international students have experience of a wide range of contexts where English is used and thus are able to extend the breadth and depth of their skills in using English appropriate to the sociocultural or academic circumstances. One element in these strategies is supporting international students to feel that they are able to enrich the experience and cultural knowledge of others. Certainly, universities can consider ways to demonstrate that they genuinely value multilateral exchanges of experience and ideas among people from differing language backgrounds. Although universities cannot ‘ensure’ that international students have effective social interaction that develops their English language proficiency off campus they can develop strategies to assist international students to have these experiences.
Examples of Good Practices

- The university provides discipline-specific academic and learning skills acculturation, which includes consideration of language proficiency and communication skills.
- The university has implemented plans to ensure academic and social inclusion for its international students from the commencement of their stay in Australia.
- The university demonstrates that it values the role played by international students in enhancing the learning experiences for all its students.
- The university ensures effective interaction of students from differing cultural backgrounds in regular academic activities.
- The university creates opportunities for students to form intercultural social networks in their learning settings and to engage in cross-cultural discussion in the discipline area.
- The university ensures international students in Australia are supported to have social interaction with a range of people in Australian communities, as well as opportunities for sharing their own culture.
- The university’s community engagement strategies include intercultural experiences for international students.
- The university supports faculties or other groups (alumni) to provide intercultural interaction in a professional or disciplinary context.
Theme 5: Quality Assurance

Relevant Principles

**Principle 10**
Universities use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve their English language development activities.

Explanation
*The tenth Good Practice Principle is derived from continuous quality improvement models, which entail the monitoring of outcomes and identification of ways to improve one or more elements of current practices. These elements include policies, procedures, projects and activities, curricula, resourcing and the ways in which ‘results’ are defined and assessed. Identification of improvements can occur through internal reflection, benchmarking and comparisons, research findings, or considering the views of students and other stakeholders.*

Examples of Good Practices
- The university regularly compares its policies and practices for English language development against those of comparable institutions nationally and internationally and considers these in developing policies and practices that reflect the specific needs of its students and the requirements of specific discipline areas.
- Course reviews consider the extent to which development of English language proficiency and communication are taken into account in curriculum design and delivery.
- The university obtains regular information from students on the extent to which they consider their English language proficiency is improving.
- The university knows the extent to which its graduates are satisfied with the development of their English language proficiency through their time at university.
- The university knows the extent to which academics consider students’ English language proficiency on entry is appropriate and is developed through their studies.
- The university knows the extent to which employers are satisfied with the English language proficiency and communication skills of its graduates.
- The university has ongoing dialogue with professional accreditation and registration bodies about their expectations regarding English language proficiency and the English language proficiency of the university’s graduates.
- The university uses research findings, including its own, to inform its strategies for the development of students’ English language proficiency.
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DISCUSSION PAPER 2:
IN-COURSE STUDENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Katie Dunworth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This discussion paper is one of three produced for a national symposium: Five Years On: English Language Competence of International Students, and is focused on the in-course English language development of international students within higher education.

The paper begins by briefly summarising some of the key factors which have helped shape developments since the 2007 National Symposium. It then goes on to provide an update to the Arkoudis and Starfield (2007) discussion paper prepared for that first symposium, and outlines some of the non-academic activities for international students that have been reported as facilitating English language growth. It also describes some of the ways in which institutions have gone about identifying the language development needs of their students, particularly at an institutional level.

The paper focuses on two major conceptual shifts that have emerged particularly strongly from the literature over the past five years:

- Wide recognition that ‘English language competence’ is developmental rather than static, and that all students need to have access to opportunities for language development;
- General rejection of remedial approaches to language development and student support in favour of inclusive and supportive educational environments that take a ‘joint venture’ approach to education.

In consideration of these concepts, and taking into account the standards-based approach that now frames the higher education environment, this paper identifies a number of challenges for in-course language development in higher education:

- To position English language development as a core rather than marginal teaching and learning issue
- To describe and assess language use within courses of study, and to monitor progress and achievement
- To integrate, and produce synergies between, currently disparate strategies for enhancing the international student experience
- To provide staff development opportunities that will assist the facilitation of systemic change.

The paper argues that, given the overarching nature of the issues identified and the legislative framework in with they are situated, taking the next steps towards addressing these challenges will require action at a sector and institution-wide level. While further studies are likely to be beneficial in facilitating evidence-based decisions, over the past five years there has been a plethora of research output that has moved the sector towards what might be described as a tipping point for a new paradigm for in-course English language development in higher education.
LIMITATIONS

This discussion paper is subject to the following limitations:

- The activities, research and developments identified and discussed are limited primarily to the university sector, as it is universities that feature most prominently in the research literature. However, it is likely that much of the information can be extrapolated to other tertiary educational environments.

- The focus of the paper is on the Australian context and most references are to research conducted in Australia, although international research is included where it has informed practice in Australia, or is relevant to the Australian context.

- The paper’s emphasis is on research reported during the five years since the 2007 National Symposium.

- Some topics that may appear relevant to in-course language development have not been included in this paper if they have been identified as being more appropriately discussed in one of the other discussion papers (e.g. Workplace Integrated Learning, capstone units and English language entry levels). This has been done in order to minimise overlaps between the three discussion papers prepared for the 2013 Symposium.
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DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the sake of brevity, certain terms listed below have been used consistently throughout this paper to describe constructs, roles, individuals and organisations. It is, however, recognised that these terms may be associated with a particular context or world view, and that they may not sufficiently encompass the full range of meanings that associated terms would convey in the Australian higher education sector.

- **Academic language and learning unit (ALL unit)** – an organisation that primarily conducts activities intended to enhance students’ in-course English language use, academic literacy, communication skills or study skills. It includes units, centres, offices, areas, institutes and hubs.

- **Language and learning advisor (LLA)** – staff member who primarily conducts activities to enhance students’ post-entry English language use, academic literacy, communication skills or study skills. Such staff are often but may not necessarily be located within an ALL unit.

- **Course (of study)** – An overall credit-bearing program of study, successful completion of which leads to graduation.

- **Discipline** – Field of study or academic subject.

- **English as an additional language (EAL)** – in this paper, this term has been used in preference to others that are also in common use: non-English speaking background (NESB), English as a second language (ESL), culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), English as an additional dialect (EAD), second language (L2), language background other than English (LBOTE).

- **English for Academic Purposes (EAP)** – in the UK, this term is often used to describe the kind of language development activities that in Australia would be performed by academic language and learning advisors.

- **English language development** – the enhancement of students’ abilities to use the English language within relevant educational domains of use. Specific assistance with language development is sometimes incorporated into the broader term ‘academic language and learning’ in Australia.

- **In-course** – subsequent to enrolment in a course of study, and prior to graduation.

- **Post-entry language assessment (PELA)** – Evaluation of students’ in-course English language development needs. It is used in this paper to denote both the abstract concept, and (in a countable form) to describe specific instruments to assess language post-entry.

- **Unit (of study)** – A named topic area, allocated a certain number of credit points, within an overall course of study. Other terms in use in Australia with this meaning include ‘course’, ‘program’, and ‘module’.
1. INTRODUCTION

This paper builds on a discussion paper produced for the 2007 National Symposium on the English language competence of international students (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007), which was one of three documents prepared for that event. The Symposium, and the Final Report which resulted from it (Australian Education International [AEI], 2007), prepared the ground for considerable change in Australia in the provision of post-entry student English language assessment and development activities. In brief, the final report (AEI, 2007, p. 17-18) called for action in the following areas:

- **Institutional and program priorities**: for example, strengthening of in-course language and academic support, a more generalised use of diagnostic language tests and a greater level of embedding language development within discipline-based study;
- **Quality assurance**: for example, more effective measures for auditing students’ English language levels, and consideration of the establishment of national standards for English competence;
- **Research**: for example, tracer studies of different student cohorts and the development of a suite of tests and indicators;
- **Information needs and collaboration**: for example, a greater level of cooperation between all stakeholders to address issues and share knowledge;
- **Public relations**: to communicate with the wider public information about international student language proficiency and to disseminate examples of good practice;
- **Resources**: key stakeholders to provide adequate resources to ensure quality outcomes.

Following this call for action, the then Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) funded a project, undertaken through the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), which resulted in the publication of the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities* report (DEEWR, 2009). Extensively disseminated and very effectively publicised, the *Good Practice Principles* have been a driver for change within the higher education sector (Fenton-Smith, 2012). The change may also have been accelerated by an indication in the report’s introduction that future AUQA quality audits might investigate the application of the Principles within a given institution, a prediction borne out in subsequent AUQA audit reports (Harris, 2010).

In 2010, following consultation with the higher education sector, DEEWR then requested the project steering committee to revise the *Good Practice Principles* into a set of English language standards that could apply to all students across higher education. The six draft *English Language Standards for Higher Education* (see Appendix A) were submitted by the committee to DEEWR in July of that year. The timing of the submission coincided with the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), and as a consequence the draft *English Language Standards* have not undergone a process of consultation and finalisation. They have, however, been reported in the media (e.g. Trounson, 2011), have been widely distributed throughout the sector, and are, anecdotal feedback suggests, informally in use within some Australian institutions.

There have been several other factors which have also assisted in maintaining momentum for action in the higher education sector with regard to student English language development. For example, Government-sponsored initiatives have included a review of Australian higher education (Bradley, Nunan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), a review of the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act (Baird, 2010), and a review of the student visa program (Knight, 2011), the reports from all of which contained implications for sector approaches to the issue of students’ English language use. The Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) and its predecessor, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), have also been proactive on this issue from a research and scholarship perspective, and have funded several projects and fellowships associated with tertiary language development in the last few years.

In addition, the Streamlined Visa Processing Arrangements (SVPA) for universities (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2012a), initiated following the Knight review into the student visa program, included in the selection criteria for participating institutions the condition that universities had in place strategies to ensure that students had “appropriate levels of English at the commencement of their courses” as well as strategies “to ensure that students continue to develop their English skills during their studies” (DIAC, 2012b, p. 10). All but one of the 42 eligible institutions successfully applied to participate in the scheme, and are therefore committed to meeting these conditions, which are in intent aligned to Standards 1 and 4 respectively of the draft *English Language Standards*. 
Undoubtedly, the most important recent driver for continued action at senior levels has been the creation of the Higher Education Standards Framework and the establishment of TEQSA, Australia’s regulatory and quality assurance agency for higher education in Australia, which resulted from the recommendations of the Bradley et al (2008) review of higher education. TEQSA’s announcement that English language proficiency will be one of two “matters of concern” to be the focus of its first thematic quality assessments (TEQSA, 2012) has not only attracted the continued attention of the media (Lane, 2012), but has ensured that the issue maintains its importance as a strategic consideration within the higher education sector.

In short, the last five years have witnessed a paradigmatic change in the approach to in-course English language development in higher education; the consequence of a major shift in attitudes towards and governance of the issue. Student English language development is now mainstream; the target of high level initiatives within institutions and intense scrutiny from without. This discussion paper examines the details of how institutions have responded with regard to the provision of in-course language development strategies. It describes the activities that are currently available, reports on their strengths and weaknesses as described in the scholarly and research literature, and identifies the critical issues and key areas of focus for continued consideration.
2. MODELS OF PRACTICE: IN-COURSE STUDENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Part 2 examines both whole-of-institution approaches and specific micro-level activities designed to promote student language growth. It has been divided into three sections. The first explores the concepts and arguments related to ‘embedding’, which has been identified as a way forward by numerous scholars and practitioners working within a diverse range of higher education contexts (e.g., Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Briguglio, 2012; Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010; Leask & Wallace, 2011), and so merits its own section. The second section describes the wide range of other language development activities, and examines their strengths and weaknesses as identified in the scholarly and research literature. The third section briefly examines some non-academic activities within the broader internationalisation agenda which have been reported as facilitating English language growth. Many of the details on the different models of practice described in this paper have been obtained over the course of the Degrees of Proficiency project. A database of all universities in Australia, and links to examples of particular language development practices, are available from the website: www.degreesofproficiency.aall.org.au.

While the focus of this section, given its purpose, is on international students, it should be noted that most of the specific learning activities identified are open to and relevant for all students. It is now widely recognised that it is not only international students, English as an additional language (EAL) students, or designated equity groups who are in need of language development opportunities, but the wider student population (Briguglio, 2012; Larcombe & Malkin, 2008).

2.1 Embedding language development in the disciplines

The concept of embedding is associated with what has been identified as a critical issue for English language development in higher education, as described by Marginson (in Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012, pp iv–v): “Rather than being treated as a core learning issue, [English language proficiency] tends to be pathologised and marginalised. It becomes sidelined into low status remedial programs provided by under-resourced specialists who are given little respect by disciplinary academics”.

The term ‘embedding’ describes the conscious integration of English language development strategies, opportunities, activities, tasks and material into discipline-based courses or units of study. Different taxonomies of ‘embedding’ have been identified in the literature, one of the most widely cited being the adjunct/integrated/embedded model produced by Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller (2001), which this paper has adapted to suggest four main models of embedding in current use:

- **Adjunct**: Discipline-related language development modules are added on to associated units
- **Parallel**: generic language development activities are included in disciplinary units
- **Integrated**: discipline-specific language development activities are included in disciplinary units/courses
- **Seamless**: Language development is integrated into course content, teaching and assessment, supported by institutional policies and procedures.

Increasing numbers of studies are beginning to indicate that participation in embedded language development can be correlated with, if not causally linked to, improved academic results (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Bamforth, 2010; Barratt, Hanlon, & Rankin, 2011; Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode, & Kocatepe, 2004; Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010; McKauge, Emmerton, Bond, Steadman, Green, Sweep, & Cole, 2009; Mort & Drury, 2012; Stappenburg & Barrett-Lennard, 2008; Thies, 2012). While it is difficult to provide a clear connection between any language development activity and language growth because of the number of intervening variables, the consistency and frequency of the findings in the research literature tend to indicate that embedding can play an important role in students’ language development. These findings are not unexpected, since it is axiomatic that language is not simply a ‘conduit for the transmission of pre-existing meanings’ (Kern, 2000, p. 270), but is involved in meaning creation. As the literature indicates, there are differences between academic disciplines in ways of understanding and expressing knowledge (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Harper, Prentice, & Wilson, 2011; North, 2005). Developing knowledge “in any discipline and across disciplines is socially, culturally and linguistically constructed” (Crichton & Scarino, 2007, p. 4.13), and “discourse styles are related not just to the object of individual disciplines, but also the ideologies, epistemologies, argumentative tools and instructional methods of the discourse communities that produce them” (Hyland & Bondi, 2006, p. 13). Such a view of language strongly supports an embedded approach to language development. Indeed, from this perspective, effective learning can only take place through a process of continuous and context-informed leaning, assisted by explicit focus on language within the disciplines (Benzie, 2010), as encapsulated, for example, in the ‘academic literacies’ approach (Lea & Street, 2006).
One obstacle to the introduction of embedding, it has been argued, is that there may be little support for it from academic disciplinary staff. Reasons given for resistance to the idea include a lack of the requisite expertise, lack of time, lack of space in an already crowded curriculum (Cloughen & Connell, 2012), and a belief that language development is not part of an academic’s role (Thies, 2012). However, there are already numerous successful examples of embedding in place, usually involving collaboration between language specialists and disciplinary staff (Kokkinn & Mahar, 2011; Kennelly et al, 2010; Mort & Drury, 2012). Some of these are identified below.

Just as it cannot be assumed that any student will acquire the disciplinary language resources they need through ‘immersion and osmosis’ (Priest, 2009, p. A79), neither can it be assumed that discipline-based academics can draw on their own resources to enact an embedding agenda. If institutions wish to move towards the embedded approach, sustained professional development for disciplinary staff is likely to be required (Harris, 2010; Leask & Wallace, 2011; Thies, 2012). Devlin & Samarawickrema, (2010, p. 119) argue that “student diversity has increased and therefore effective teaching must be able to manage and address such diversity”, but research indicates that comparatively few of those teaching in higher education have lived outside Australia, and most are monolingual (McAlinden, 2013). In consideration of this, at least one institution has developed an academic English literacy framework that focuses on staff needs, for example including targets within schools for a proportion of staff with language expertise, funding for staff to undertake credit-bearing units in language and academic literacies or obtain a TESOL qualification, and opportunities for team teaching with the academic language and learning (ALL) unit (University of Western Sydney, 2010).

The arguments presented for embedding language development within the disciplines go beyond the nexus between language and content, however. Multiple studies across disciplines have led to a consensus that assessment has a major impact on learning, and that “academic success is defined by summative assessment, and learners will try to optimise their chances of success” (van der Vleuten, Schuwirth, Scheele, Dreissen, & Hodges, 2010, p. 707). It follows, therefore, that if language use is part of teaching and learning and built into assessment criteria, students will be more likely to engage in behaviour that will enhance their language development, particularly as discipline-related language development is usually seen as more relevant or motivating for students than generic activities (Baik & Greig, 2009; Sloan & Porter, 2010). Conversely, if students are rewarded by marks for content irrespective of language use, there is no incentive to improve, and may, moreover, give rise to allegations about ‘soft marking’ (Benzie, 2010; Bretag, 2007). In consideration of an appropriate choice of strategy, institutions need to take into account the establishment of conditions that will encourage students to take responsibility for their own language development.

The arguments presented above need to be viewed through the prism of the prevailing educational context. According to the Australian Government’s My University website, international students now comprise more than 30% of the total number of enrolments in around a third of Australian universities; most are from non-English speaking backgrounds. The domestic cohort, too, is poised to become much more diverse; and student and staff behaviours are altering in response to a raft of changing circumstances (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). The scholarly and research literature on the embedding of language development in the disciplines, which has increased exponentially over the last five years, argues that diversity is best addressed by curriculum renewal to meet current needs, rather than by relegating to the margins the many individuals who do not fit increasingly outdated ‘norms’.

2.1.1 Institutional examples of an embedded approach

Within the current standards-based higher education environment, it will be incumbent on higher education institutions to demonstrate their commitment to monitoring students’ language growth over the duration of their courses. To date, many of the embedding strategies that have been reported in both the Australian and international literature have focused on specific initiatives within individual units or courses of study, but there are some instances of universities which have moved towards the identification of an institution-wide scaffolded framework for language development. The University of Western Australia (UWA), for example, has introduced a university-wide Communication Skills Framework, which is used to demonstrate how communication skills are developed over a course or major. It comprises four elements: writing, oral presentations, critical information literacy and interpersonal skills, and takes an incremental and cyclic approach. Considerable support is offered to staff through UWA’s Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning to assist them to make best use of the framework (Barrett-Lennard, Chalmers, & Longnecker, 2011).

Griffith University is another example of an institution that has undergone a radical restructure to position language development at the core of teaching and learning through its English Language Enhancement Strategy (GELES). GELES, which ensures that students are offered opportunities for language growth prior to commencement of, during and at the end of their studies, is accompanied by a program of research and development that promotes evidence-based decision-making. Aspects of GELES have been reported widely.
in the literature (e.g. Humphreys, Haugh, Fenton-Smith, Lobo, Michael, & Walkinshaw, 2012), and in 2012, five staff from Griffith University collectively won an Australian Government Office of Learning and Teaching Citation for ‘enhancing international students’ academic English language proficiency through innovative discipline-specific courses, exemplary assessment practices, and strong support mechanisms that foster independent learning’.

A rather different example is that of Bond University, which has developed an institutional approach that has integrated the concept of student language development into its strategy for the internationalisation of the curriculum, guided by the principles of Universal Design for Learning (Kinash, 2011). The Bond approach to language development was recognised as effective in its 2010 AUQA Report, and its internationalisation strategy is listed on the AUQA Good Practice Database.

Each of the cases described above illustrates how different solutions have been found to suit the requirements of individual institutions while positioning language development as a core learning issue and following an embedding agenda. The question remains, however, whether it is necessary, desirable or feasible to move beyond general expectations of development to identify generic language ‘levels’ or ‘outcomes’ at stages of students’ trajectories through their course of study. This is an issue which is currently the subject of some debate, and one which requires considerable further discussion. At its core is the question of the nature of language. The Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) Course Accreditation Standards 1.2 and 5.6 include the requirement that courses of study provide for the development of English language proficiency as a “key graduate attribute” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, pp. 14 & 17). At present, most institutions appear “to lack an agreed means by which to monitor and evaluate students’ English language skills” (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012, p. 12); an outcome which is inherently dependent on an understanding of the construct that is being monitored and evaluated. A cogent position on the nature of language in higher education would therefore seem to be a pre-requisite to developing a systematic and overarching approach to students’ English language development.

2.1.2 Examples of embedding activities within courses

At the level of specific activities, the research literature and the higher education sector through such organisations as AUQA and the OLT have acknowledged numerous instances of good practice. Space precludes the inclusion of most of these, but three are presented below to illustrate how the principles of embedding have been operationalised. One example is the Write Reports in Science and Engineering (WRiSE) online program, the result of a collaboration between the Universities of Sydney and New South Wales. Developed by a team comprising disciplinary specialists, language and learning advisors (LLAs) and eLearning specialists, the resource includes discipline-specific content in nine areas: molecular biology, biology, chemistry, physiology, microbiology, chemical engineering, civil engineering and mining engineering. The materials, which are divided into two sections: ‘Help with report writing’ and ‘Understanding content’, may either be used as an adjunct resource or integrated into a unit of study. The resource was evaluated using multiple approaches, which yielded strong positive feedback from staff and students, as well as higher marks for those students who participated (Drury & Jones, 2010; Mort & Drury, 2012; Mort, Drury, Calvo, Skinner, McEwan, Levy, Molina, & Mitrajit, 2010). The WRiSE program was awarded a Highly Commended citation from the Australasian Association of Engineering Education for Programs that Enhance Learning.

SCRIPT (Skills for Communicating and Relating in Pharmacy Training) at the University of Queensland is an example of an integrated program. SCRIPT is the result of a three-way collaboration between staff in the School of Pharmacy, the Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education and the Teaching and Educational Development Institute. The program is offered to students from culturally diverse backgrounds, and develops students’ oral language use in contexts relevant to pharmacy. An article on an early iteration identified that it was evaluated using multiple methods, including a comparison of marks for those who had participated in the activity and those who had not, the former group achieving higher academic results (McKauge et al, 2009). The SCRIPT program won the University of Queensland an award for Programs that Enhance Learning at the 2012 Australian Awards for University Teaching.

The Common Unit Program at Charles Darwin University (CDU) is an example of a seamless approach to embedding. Unless exempted, all students commencing a bachelor’s degree, advanced diploma or associate degree have to complete two out of three common units. Conceived as a transition program, the common units offer a broad disciplinary distinction between Humanities/Social Science students and Science/Technology/IT students. Among a range of other skills, the program aims to develop students’ critical thinking, reading, researching and writing. Also evaluated through a rigorous process including an external review, the program was initially awarded a Carrick Citation in 2007, and in 2011 CDU received an Australian Award for University Teaching for Programs that Enhance Learning.
2.2 Specific academic language development activities

This part of the paper describes the range of academically-focused activities that are undertaken in Australian higher education institutions. They are presented here to update the Arkoudis and Starfield (2007) discussion paper, and to present the literature that critiques the place of these activities in higher education.

2.2.1 Introductory programs

A number of institutions provide introductory language and/or academic skills courses, usually run immediately prior to the start of a course of study for students who have already been unconditionally accepted (i.e. they have met both academic and English language entry requirements), but who have not yet commenced their formal program. They typically range in duration from one to three weeks. Topics offered include academic writing, proofreading, note-taking, and presentation skills. Some are targeted specifically at international students, while others are open to all students. The University of New England offers a program that is available online and accessible to international students residing outside Australia. UWA has also introduced compulsory, generic, not-for-credit language development modules which are part of the degree and which students must complete at some point during their course, non-completion having implications for the ability to graduate.

2.2.2 Generic workshops and seminars

All Australia’s universities provide generic workshops and seminars offered through an ALL unit. The content of such programs includes academic skills (such as essay writing, understanding assignments, reading critically or understanding plagiarism), study skills (such as time management or examination techniques) and specific language items (such as pronunciation or use of tenses). The duration of workshop programs varies from a minimum of one hour per topic to a series of workshops on one topic presented over the course of a period of study.

Even though those who participate in such programs often provide positive feedback on their experience (Dawson, 2011; Harris & Ashton, 2011), it has been contended that there is little evidence for their efficacy in terms of transfer across contexts and improved academic outcomes (Baik & Greig, 2009; Mort et al, 2010). The programs have been criticised on a number of grounds. These include the arguments that they can be seen as part of a ‘clinical’ model of provision that positions students as deficient and in need of remedial support (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007); that they operate as silos (Kokkinn & Mahar, 2011); and that they tend to have low attendance rates (Harris & Ashton, 2011; Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan, & Davies, 2010; Stratilas, 2011; Wingate, 2006). It has also been argued that those who do attend tend to be more motivated and less in need of assistance (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012, p. 42) than those for whom the programs are designed, and that the weakest students may avoid such programs (Harris & Ashton, 2011), even when they are compulsory (Ransom, 2009), possibly because they impose an additional burden on students’ time (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Ransom, 2009; Rochecouste et al, 2010), or because students view attendance at such programs as an “admission of failure” (Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008, p. 120). The ubiquity of the literature criticising such programs suggests that further research into their educational value would be useful so that higher education institutions are able to make evidence-based decisions on how best to promote student language development.

2.2.3 Individual consultations

Individual student consultations with a LLA are offered in most universities, although some universities may be curtailing their use (Harris & Ashton, 2011) other than for research students. There are often conditions placed on access; for example, students may have had to complete a post-entry language assessment, attend group workshops, or have a referral to the ALL unit from a lecturer or tutor. There are also sometimes limits placed on the frequency and duration of the consultation.

There has been a certain amount of criticism levelled against this type of activity, as well as calls for evaluation studies to investigate their value to the student and to the institution. One issue identified has been cost; in a time of economic tension, they may be seen as “an expensive luxury” (Wilson, Li, & Collins, 2011, p. A139). In addition, it has been suggested that individual consultations may be interpreted as a proofreading or editing service (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007), and that faculty staff may perceive their function to be that of a quick fix, or “remedial support for disadvantaged or under prepared students” (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2009, p. A38). On the other hand, it has been argued that they are valuable in providing staff with an understanding of students and their needs, which can then inform other teaching contexts (Chanock, 2007; Huijser, Kimmins, & Galligan, 2008); that they afford an opportunity for scaffolded development (Woodward-Kron, 2007); that they are of particular value to postgraduate research students (Woodward-Kron, 2007; Clerihan, 1996), for whom some other types of activity may not be relevant; and that they provide a dialogic opportunity for students to develop their understandings and become more autonomous (Wilson, Li, & Collins, 2011, p. A140).
2.2.4 Online resources and e-learning

Online learning may form part of any of the models of practice identified elsewhere in this paper (for example, a credit-bearing unit may be available online). Additionally, there are online and e-learning language development opportunities that are self-access programs or independent learning resources. These have usually been developed by staff in an ALL unit, sometimes in collaboration with discipline-based academics, and are typically optional and additional to the curriculum. They tend to fall into four main categories:

- Lists of resources or links to external resources.
- Generic learning content, available through the Internet or learning management system (LMS).
- Discipline-specific learning content, available through the Internet or LMS.
- Outsourced (i.e. commercially available) language and learning content available to students through a LMS.

The publicly available online content varies in format from downloadable written guides to interactive web-based tasks. Many of the websites contain links to those of other institutions, providing students with access to an extremely wide range of language and learning content that includes academic skills such as note-taking in lectures; study skills such as time management; and linguistic items such as grammar or pronunciation.

2.2.5 Credit-bearing language development units

A number of universities offer credit-bearing units that focus on the development of students’ language use. Some such units offered in Australia include: academic language skills, academic writing, and language development within a specific discipline area. Some of these units are compulsory core communication units and are therefore part of an embedding strategy; some are electives, and some are open only to international or EAL students. Discipline and language specialists alike have advised caution about such units, on one side expressing concern that English for academic purposes (EAP) is not a proper topic for higher education, or that it is a ‘soft option’ (Baik & Greig, 2009) and “skews grade point averages for foreign students” (Melles, Millar, Morton, & Fagan, 2005, p. 284). On the other side, fears are expressed that without a grounding in applied linguistics and clear methodological commitments EAP will lack academic credibility and be conceptualised as remedial (Melles et al, 2005, p. 297). More research into the effectiveness of such units needs to be published if institutions are to gain an understanding of their value for language development and the usefulness of their place in an overall course of study. The 2009 Storch and Tapper study, conducted with postgraduate students and using a test/retest design, is a rare example of detailed reporting on evaluation of learning effectiveness. It showed that students’ language use had improved at the end of the unit, although the authors were cautious in claiming that this was the result of the program.

2.2.6 Peer-to-peer programs

Peer learning, whether or not it has been set up specifically for language development purposes, is reported as being extremely effective - developing both disciplinary expertise and communication skills, promoting scaffolded learning, affectively engaging participants and promoting learner autonomy (Topping, 2005; Ladyshewsky, 2006). It has been identified as a particularly valuable tool during students’ first year of study (Black & MacKenzie, 2008) and, aligned with technology, as a useful resource for transnational programs (Best, Hajzer, & Henderson, 2007; Jones, Garralda, Li, & Lock, 2006).

In Australian universities, possibly its most widespread manifestation within an academic context is through Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). PASS is an international program, with the University of Wollongong being the National Centre for Australasia. That university has trained staff from most of Australia’s universities to supervise PASS, and the program is now available in many of Australia’s universities. The focus of PASS is on improving students’ understanding of their subject, but it also exemplifies the concept of embedded language development in its enhancement of study and communication skills. Other more overtly language-focused peer-to-peer activities available in Australia include peer writing mentoring and conversation groups, with at least one program established specifically to benefit EAL students (Harvey-Bravo & Monaghan, 2011).

Peer-to-peer programs, it has been argued, have the potential to be educationally transformational, particularly when coupled with technological innovation (Kirkwood, 2012). What is more, it has been suggested that they can be particularly valuable for international students; helping them feel valued, promoting speedy adjustment, encouraging integration with the local community and fostering language growth (Partridge, 2008).
2.3 Extra-curricular opportunities for student language development

Much of the literature on the international student experience draws a connection between English language proficiency and issues that include but go beyond academic outcomes. Higher levels of English language proficiency are associated with student agency (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Rabia, 2012; Xu, 2012), for example. Low levels of language proficiency have been linked to difficulty establishing social networks and a lack of employment opportunities (Roberts, 2011) and to plagiarism (Leask & Wallace, 2011). The literature not only suggests that higher levels of language proficiency are associated with a more satisfactory experience for students, however. The converse also appears to apply: that when international EAL students have greater engagement with local students, and when they take advantage of experiential opportunities to participate in the host culture, they are more likely to develop higher levels of language proficiency (Campbell, 2012; Lawson, 2012; Rochecouste et al, 2010). For institutions interested in student English language development, it would therefore seem to be appropriate to consider the integration into any strategy of avenues for student interaction beyond formal teaching and learning contexts.

The ESOS Act has ensured that pastoral care is available to all international students in higher education, though there has been criticism, in Australia as well as overseas, of the way in which it has been provided. As with language development programs, there have been calls, not only within the internationalisation literature but also within the ‘widening participation’ literature, to reconceptualise student support away from reactive and deficit-based support programs to the creation of a culture that is supportive and inclusive (Billingham, 2009; Devlin, 2011; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009; Northedge, 2003; Roberts, 2011). What the literature repeatedly emphasises is a sense of partnership: that student English language development (and student support) is a joint venture between the institution and student, in which the institution “has a responsibility to provide trained staff, resources and opportunities but equally, the student has a responsibility to work with them” (Leask & Wallace, 2011, p. 27).

This approach is instantiated in the many non-academic programs within the higher education sector that can promote student language growth. One example is the ‘buddy’ programs that have been introduced in many institutions (Campbell, 2012; Lawson, 2012), which often involve interaction between international and domestic students, sometimes with a peer mentoring focus. The University of Adelaide, for example, offers a Peer Mentor program that has been identified as an example of good practice and evaluated by a student panel at the 17th ISANA Conference as “the best in the country” (AEI, 2009). There are also programs that reach out into the wider community, such as the GLoBALL program offered through RMIT which has partnered with Essendon Football Club and the City of Melbourne to provide a program that focuses on leadership, teamwork and communication (AEI, 2009).

There are numerous other examples which have been well documented in the literature, and which embody the concept of partnership. They illustrate a clear thematic link between the literature on student support and that on student English language development. There is a groundswell of opinion that the deficit approach is inequitable and educationally ineffective and that language development should be reconceptualised (Benzie, 2010; Briguglio & Smith, 2012; Rochecouste et al, 2010). Research indicates that “international students starting with low measured proficiency can survive, acquire proficiency and succeed, if the learning setting is conducive” (Sawir et al, 2012, p. 438). The literature is critical of the portrayal of international EAL students “as having a language deficit, typically treated as a ‘problem’ that requires remediation, when in fact they have a potentially more sophisticated linguistic and cultural repertoire incorporating at least one language in addition to English” (Crichton & Scarino, 2007, p. 4.9, original italics), which could possibly benefit the “essentially monolingual ‘Australian’ student who has a less sophisticated linguistic and cultural range” (Leask & Wallace, 2011, p. 25). This perspective, moreover, directly counteracts a viewpoint often presented in the media of international EAL students as deficient and dragging down standards in higher education (e.g. Dunn, 2011; Paton, 2012).
The student population is becoming increasingly diverse, for reasons briefly outlined above and described in the literature (e.g., Birrell, Healy, Edwards, & Dobson, 2008; Bradley et al, 2008). As a consequence, the language and learning development needs of students are becoming more heterogeneous, and some form of needs assessment is generally viewed as desirable to ensure that assistance is targeted and appropriate. The final report on the 2007 National Symposium (AEI, 2007) called for a “more generalised use of English language diagnostic tests” (p. 17), a recommendation that many institutions quickly adopted. This section describes current usage of what has become known as post-entry language assessment (PELA), as well as the other means which are used to identify developmental needs.

3.1 Post-entry English language assessment (PELA)

Since the 2007 National Symposium and the publication of the Good Practice Principles (which includes the principle that students’ language development needs should be identified at an early stage of their course), there has been a substantial rise in the reported use of PELA in higher education. The original argument put to the 2007 National Symposium for an increase in the use of PELA was to “identify ‘at risk’ students and offer targeted support” (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007, p. 28). As their reported use has risen, there has been a concomitant increase in discussion on the function and value of these instruments (e.g., Dunworth, 2009; Dyson, 2009; Elder & von Randow, 2008; Harris, 2010; Moore, 2010; Murray, 2010; Ransom, 2009; Read, 2008; von Randow, 2010), which has assisted in generating debate on their efficacy, and clarifying some of the issues that have been identified.

The 2012 Degrees of Proficiency project identified a multiplicity of types of PELA with differing characteristics, as described in Table 1 below. The characteristics selected for a PELA reflect the beliefs and values that inform the choice, as well as the function of the instrument, so it is important that, if a PELA is to be used, it forms part of a coherent broader educational strategy. One basic consideration is which ‘language needs’ of which students a PELA should be identifying. It is broadly acknowledged that it is ethically imperative for a PELA - and for that matter any language assessment - to be non-discriminatory (Alderson, 2005; Ransom, 2009), and that if a PELA is to be compulsory, it must be so for all students who fall into the category identified for the administration of the assessment. This has resource consequences for institution-wide assessments, and some have developed a two-tier process comprising an initial ‘screening’ component that eliminates most students, followed by a more detailed assessment for those who remain.

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Large-scale, institution-wide PELAs appear to have a number of generic benefits, including the provision of comparative data to managers and consciousness raising among staff and students (Dunworth, 2009; Ransom, 2009). However, it is also claimed that ‘stand-alone’ PELAs have some disadvantages. The literature suggests that their lack of connection with students’ disciplines may inhibit use by students and foster an “outsourcing approach” to language development (Moore, 2010, p. 7). In addition, their breadth of application may limit their value as instruments for needs assessment, which to be effective requires detailed information on performance related to specific items (Alderson, 2005). If they are voluntary, they tend not to attract those they most wish to target (Ransom, 2009), and if they are mandated it is difficult to enforce compliance, which is problematic because “to have a policy that is not enforced can be perceived as meritless by both students and staff” (Ransom, 2009, p. A21).

Assessments that identify students’ language needs serve the dual functions of (a) discovering students’ strengths and weaknesses, and of (b) enabling educators to make decisions about what they should be teaching (Alderson, 2005; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Read, 2012). There are examples of this symbiosis in the literature (Barratt et al, 2011; Bonnano & Jones, 2007), particularly when assessments have been embedded in formal study programs. Indeed, it has been claimed that if the concept of ‘embedding’ were adopted as an educational strategy, then “formalised diagnostic testing across the whole institution would not be necessary” (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012, p. 163).

In general, the very speedy response of the higher education sector to this particular recommendation from the 2007 National Symposium may have resulted in a situation where “practice has ‘run ahead of theorisation and empirical research’” (Marginson, 2007, cited in Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012, p. 115). At some institutions there has been careful scrutiny and analysis, but it is not clear, for example, that all PELAs have been designed with sufficient attention to fundamental considerations such as construct validity, that markers are sufficiently well-trained or knowledgeable (Dunworth & Briguglio, 2010), or that they are being used by students, course designers or managers to inform practice. Nevertheless, the field of post-entry language assessment is a vibrant area of activity and research, and is likely to result in greater understanding and improvement in the future, so long as the current level of research continues and that action taken by institutions is based on the evidence that results from that research.

### 3.2 Alternative ways of identifying language development needs

In addition to PELA, there are other ways of identifying students’ language development needs after they have commenced their courses which are currently in use. They include the following:

- Students independently consult a LLA, or are referred by their lecturer or tutor. Needs in such cases may be identified through an interview with a LLA, discussion of a piece of written work, or by completion of a self-assessment task.
- Formative assessment is undertaken early in a unit of study, and the information it provides to lecturers and tutors helps shape appropriate strategies for language enhancement (Murray, 2011).
- Students identified as ‘at risk’ because of their academic grades can be tracked and assisted in identifying their language development needs (Hirsh, 2007).

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, and some institutions are already using combinations of these different strategies. Ultimately, the selection of any approach would form part of a coherent strategy for student language development within an individual institution.
4. FOR DISCUSSION

This paper has identified a number of key themes that have emerged from the recent literature on student English language development in higher education in Australia and overseas, and has described the standards-based environment which frames current debate. The themes identified resonate across the sector as a whole and may best be addressed by sector-level and institution-wide strategies, following discussion and clarification of the issues that arise from those themes. These are presented below as questions for further consideration.

1. How should student language assessment and development be integrated into teaching and learning?

The Government-led standards-based approach to higher education, and TEQSA’s stated early focus on English language proficiency, means that higher education institutions have little option but to consider this question. There is consensus among scholars and researchers from across a range of areas of interest in higher education (for example, policy, language development, internationalisation) that language development should be mainstreamed in higher education, and that the most effective way of achieving this aim is the embedding of language development in the disciplines. The epistemological position that informs this approach, the educational values that guide it and the available evidence as to its success together make a coherent and compelling case for its adoption, particularly now that the focus is on the language development of all students rather than a specific cohort. However, few higher education institutions have embraced this approach at an institutional or policy level, and some may feel that alternative approaches are more appropriate. Whatever the ultimate approach taken by an individual institution, further discussion is required on how the sector can transform student language development into a core teaching and learning issue and develop strategies for enhancing, assessing, monitoring and evaluating students’ English language use.

2. How should institutions measure and/or monitor student language development?

Associated with the first issue is the more specific question, expressed on page 10 of this paper, as to whether, and if so, how, institutions or disciplinary areas should establish a framework or set of standards that explicitly identify expected student language ‘levels’ or ‘outcomes’ at stages of a higher education program. There has been comparatively little discussion of this question in the literature on in-course language development, but there has been considerable interest in students’ language use at graduation and entry to employment, as described in Humphreys and Gribble (2013), one of the three papers prepared for the 2013 Symposium. In the current environment, this question is likely to emerge as a key issue.

3. What are the implications of change for staff training and professional development?

Any major changes in staff roles that result from reconceptualising the positioning of English language development are likely to require disciplinary staff to undertake professional development to equip them for the task. The role, positioning and professional development of LLAs within institutions will also need to be considered, since they will no doubt have a major role to play in collaborating with disciplinary staff, and advising on how to make the language and culture of assessments more accessible to students (Chanock, 2011; Kennelly et al, 2010). In that endeavour, institutions may need to reconsider the current positioning of LLAs “at the margins of academic life” (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012, p. 48). Further discussion of this issue can help identify development needs and clarify roles.

4. To what extent should institutions take a holistic approach?

The recent literature on internationalisation, on widening participation, on pastoral care and on the language development of all students broadly espouses a single guiding philosophy that resonates across all these areas of interest. The evidence suggests that institutions would benefit from ‘joining the dots’ between the internationalisation agenda, the promotion of student well-being, the education of diverse groups of students and student language growth. In short, it appears from the literature that the consideration of language development in higher education divorced from the broader educational experience of international students and the internationalisation goals articulated by most of Australia’s higher education institutions limits the possibilities for synergy that exist, and may inhibit the introduction of strategies with positive consequences that ripple out beyond the immediate goals. Further discussion on the ways in which the different areas might be constructively brought together at the level of both policy and practice to benefit all students may assist in addressing what tend to be currently positioned as separate issues in higher education. At the same time, what this changing landscape means for international students in particular needs also to be examined.
5. What are the key research priorities?

Since the 2007 Symposium, much research has been published in the field of in-course student English language assessment and development. Studies on embedding language development in the disciplines have been particularly fruitful, and findings indicate that this is an approach that works, by the available measures of success. It should be noted, however, that most of the articles cited in this paper on this and other language issues relate to comparatively small-scale, short-term research studies, and perhaps there is now a need for more longitudinal or large, inter-institutional investigations. In addition, this paper has identified some other, specific, areas where further research would be beneficial and would assist those in the higher education sector to make informed, evidence-based decisions: for example, about post-entry language assessment, optimal forms of language development activity, specialised credit-bearing language development units and peer learning. It would be useful for discussion to be held to identify the issues which should be prioritised for future research, as this would give guidance to researchers and funding bodies on where they might most usefully focus their attention.
5. SUMMARY

Since the last National Symposium over five years ago, there has been an upsurge of activity within the higher education sector to address the priority issues that were identified. As far as in-course language development is concerned, there have been several advances. First, needs assessment, primarily through the introduction of post-entry language assessments, has become a burgeoning field of inquiry. Second, interest in embedding language in the disciplines appears from the literature to be on the increase, accompanied by an increasingly solid body of evidence of improved learning outcomes that supports its implementation. Other activities that have become more prominent since 2007, such as the development of online resources and peer-to-peer programs, illustrate the extent to which staff within institutions are cooperating to share their knowledge and skills – another priority identified in 2007.

Some institutions have already integrated language development into their strategic plans, policies and curricula, and have commenced systemic initiatives to provide students with the educational tools they need. There is now a widespread understanding that English language entry scores are just the starting point rather than a static state of competence, and that both students and institutions have a shared responsibility to promote student language growth.

Nevertheless, there are still some fundamental issues that remain. Beliefs about how best to promote language growth and conceptions of language will always be in flux, but there is a need to work within the current standards-based system and develop an approach that is coherent across the sector. This is particularly important when it comes to communicating with the wider community, an issue that was also identified in the 2007 Symposium. Headlines in the media that draw simplistic associations between international students and, for example, mass ‘soft marking’ and ‘poor English’ cannot be countered or addressed unless sector representatives can confidently and pro-actively express a position that is coherent, understandable to non-specialists and underpinned by educational integrity.

Achieving this will require collaboration between all stakeholders, including policy-makers, decision-takers, disciplinary experts, language specialists, pastoral care providers and students. Potentially, a more ‘joined-up’ approach to international student development may build students’ sense of belonging, of agency, security and ultimately of employability. Five years on from the 2007 Symposium there is an opportunity to recognise the value of diversity not only as part of an equity agenda but as an enriching educational experience for all students and their teachers.
REFERENCES


Draft English Language Standards for Higher Education

1. The provider ensures that its students are sufficiently proficient in English to participate effectively in their higher education studies on entry.

2. The provider ensures that prospective and current students are informed about their responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their higher education studies.

3. The provider ensures that resourcing for English language development meets students’ needs throughout their studies.

4. The provider actively develops students’ English language proficiency during their studies.

5. The provider ensures that students are appropriately proficient in English when they graduate.

6. The provider uses evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve its support for the development of students’ English language proficiency.


DISCUSSION PAPER 3:
OUTCOMES – ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND THE TRANSITION TO WORK OR FURTHER STUDY

Pamela Humphreys & Cate Gribble

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is the third in a series for the national symposium *Five years on: English Language Competence of International Students*, 2013. It focuses on the English language outcomes of students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and the impact that English language proficiency (ELP) has on subsequent study and employment.

There is a widespread view among employers and professional bodies that international students are graduating without the English language competence and ‘soft skills’ required to successfully transition into the Australian labour market. Perceived deficiencies of ELP are impacting both Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and employment opportunities for EAL students.

The paper articulates some of the challenges of defining the construct of ELP in academic and professional contexts in addition to the difficulty of setting an appropriate standard for exit. It also provides a critical assessment of exit testing as a means of evidencing ELP by graduation while considering some alternative practices that institutions might adopt.

A number of key issues have been identified for further discussion: how we might conceptualise a definition of the construct of ELP; the extent to which policy and practice might ensure the cumulative development of ELP by graduation; how exiting ELP might be evidenced; the setting of realistic exiting standards and how ELP might be better integrated into graduate attribute statements and related policy. Concerns also centre on improving the provision of integrated career education and access to Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences.

Despite the heightened focus on exiting ELP in the research literature since the 2007 symposium, there is still a need for further research in key areas, including the validity of standardised tests for assessing graduating proficiency, the transition to further study and the ELP level needed for effective performance in vocational fields and trades.
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INTRODUCTION

Background

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of foreign students worldwide increased by a staggering 99%. By 2010, four million tertiary students were enrolled in institutions outside of their country of citizenship (OECD, 2012). Increased job prospects are cited by students as a key aim of obtaining a degree (Dunworth, 2001; Marginson, 1993) and the latest OECD data suggests that a tertiary education does indeed impact positively on long-term personal economic gain due to the demand for highly-skilled employees. Immigration and post-study work opportunities are also becoming important considerations when deciding where to undertake overseas study as the market becomes increasingly sophisticated (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; OECD, 2012).

In the last few decades, English has become the dominant global language. It is widely regarded as a gateway to wealth (Graddol, 2006) and has high status in the migration-development nexus (Canagarajah, Bailey, Giampapa, Hawkes, Hurst, Mahboob, Roberts & Silberstein, 2011). It is increasingly being suggested that professionals cannot fully contribute to the knowledge economy if they lack sophisticated spoken and written English skills (Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012). The linguistic hegemony exerted by English (OECD, 2012) and the dominance of institutions in English-speaking countries in the league tables (Graddol, 2006) provide such markets with the dual advantage of offering sought-after credentials as well as the opportunity to obtain English language competence.

In Australia, international education has grown markedly as a sector over the last two decades and it now enjoys the second highest percentage of overseas students among tertiary enrolments in the world (OECD, 2012). In 2011/12, international education was Australia’s fourth largest export (Olsen, 2012) and, at over $16 billion, the economic benefit of this industry is self-evident. This underlines the reciprocal benefit of international education to the recipients as well as to providers and provider economies more broadly.

However, the outcomes of tertiary students with English as an additional language (EAL) have come under scrutiny in Australia in recent years, specifically in relation to their language competence at the point of graduation and their resulting employment outcomes. The catalyst for much of the debate was the oft-cited report by Birrell, Hawthorne and Richardson (Birrell Report) (2006), which raised concerns over the alleged language standards of EAL students both at entry to and exit from Australian tertiary institutions. Birrell et al. (2006) found that at least a third of the 12,000 applicants applying for graduate skilled migration provided test scores in their visa application that were lower than IELTS 6.01, many achieving IELTS band 5.0. This raised the question of how these graduates could have passed their university exams and whether progression was occurring in English competence during degree studies. The Birrell Report and the ensuing debate brought into question the previously held assumption that undertaking a diploma or degree in Australia led to improved English language competence by graduation and there was much discussion related to “the potential to compromise English standards in terms of academic entry, progression and exit” (Hawthorne, 2007, p.23). For the first time, universities were forced to seriously examine their support and practices for the entire student journey.

Since the publication of the Birrell Report, English language proficiency (ELP) has continued to attract attention in the media, periodically casting doubt on the outcomes of EAL students. In 2010, The Australian newspaper reported that “it is impossible to report with any confidence the language abilities of our graduates” (Arkoudis, 2010). By 2011, the focus on graduating proficiency was gaining momentum with the suggestion that “far less attention is being given to understanding exit standards and to ensuring students graduate with the English language skills for employment or further study” (Arkoudis, 2011). Lane (2012a) cited the “unwritten assumption that non-English speaking students taken in with IELTS 6.5 would improve as they studied and emerge employable as professionals” and stated that international students needed English language training in order to graduate as job-ready. The language standards of domestic students from non-English speaking backgrounds were also attracting attention (Harvey & Mestan, 2012). The cumulative effect of such media attention has reinforced the negative public perceptions of the quality of EAL graduates in terms of their language outcomes and work-readiness.

Marginson suggests that we need to have confidence that “all graduates, with no exceptions, are operating at professional levels of English language competence” (Arkoudis et al., 2012, p.v), regardless of whether they intend to advance to further study or gain employment in Australia or elsewhere. This is increasingly being questioned at a time when universities are more likely than ever to be judged on the outcomes of their graduates (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

1 IELTS was the only test accepted.
IEAA / AEI symposium 2007

As a result of mounting concern, in 2007, Australian Education International (AEI) commissioned the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) to deliver a national symposium related to the efficacy of policy and practice in the area of English language competence of international students in Australian universities. This forum led to the publication of three discussion papers and a final report in which the focus was shifted from predominantly front-end considerations to three key stages of the student lifecycle: entry, in-course and exit. The current paper focuses specifically on the third stage identified above and continues the debate presented in Discussion Paper 3 Outcomes – Language, Employment and Further Study (Hawthorne, 2007), which highlighted a number of issues:

1. The lack of empirical evidence or mechanisms to audit ELP and academic progression during degrees;
2. The impact of ELP on subsequent study;
3. The impact of ELP on employment outcomes;
4. The lack of certainty regarding the level of ELP desired by employers; specifically, the lack of certainty regarding the required ELP level needed for effective performance in vocational fields and trades;
5. The interconnection of international education and skilled migration programs.

This paper considers what has occurred in the intervening five years and the current state of play in relation to these matters.
ELP IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The policy context

Since 2007, the standard of ELP of EAL students in higher education has received increasing attention in government reports and documentation. The Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley Review) (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), whilst focused on all aspects of higher education, stated that the development of ELP should be embedded in the curriculum so as to “place a greater emphasis on the preparation of international students for the world of work and particularly for working in Australia” (p.103). It also suggested that providers should give serious consideration to the development of work-placement programs and pursue initiatives to improve language testing and teaching. In 2010, the Commonwealth government published the Stronger, Simpler, Smarter ESOS: Supporting International Students (Baird Review) (Baird, 2010). While its main purpose was to focus on the regulatory framework, the report also commented on ELP, arguing that “providers are not adequately considering the actual English language needs of a student to complete a particular course” (Baird, 2010, p.10). It further suggested that providers should ensure that “English language entry levels and support are appropriate for the course and, where relevant, the expected professional outcomes” (Baird, 2010, p.11). A third key review in this period was the Strategic Review of the Student Visa Program (Knight Review) (Knight, 2011), commissioned to re-consider visa policy for overseas students. It, too, referenced the language outcomes of this cohort, noting that students themselves reported a decline in their proficiency over the course of their degree (Knight, 2011). The Knight Review also recommended changes that related to the severing of the link between tertiary education and the opportunity to migrate to Australia. The commentary in these three reviews demonstrates that the standard of ELP is firmly on the national higher education agenda.

In addition to the above reviews and reports, the quality assurance architecture in Australian higher education has also begun to focus more explicitly on ELP. The newly established Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has indicated that ELP will feature heavily in the new standards framework currently under development by the Standards Panel, and that institutions will be required to monitor the ELP of their students (DIISTRE, 2011; TEQSA, 2011a, 2011b). In August 2012, it was announced that TEQSA’s first thematic review would be related to English standards (Lane, 2012b), underlining the importance of this issue in the eyes of the national regulator. Indeed, the TEQSA commissioner was quoted as saying that “admission standards were only part of the story and that exiting competence was also a focus” and that language standards were a “major, decade-long, sector-wide issue” (Lane, 2012b).

The Good Practice Principles

In 2008, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) commissioned the development of a set of good practice principles for ELP for international students in Australian universities (DEEWR, 2009). Described as a useful launching point or ‘starter gun’ (Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth & Harris, 2011), the good practice principles (GPPs) provided a ‘call to action’ to universities across Australia and there has been widespread institutional uptake as a result.

Many of the principles refer implicitly to outcomes of ELP as a result of cumulative development. Only GPP number five relates explicitly to ELP at the point of graduation (see right).

The report goes on to state that:

“The fifth good practice principle recognises that when students graduate from an Australian university, they should possess the English language proficiency and communication skills to perform effectively in subsequent employment and professional activities and to engage in society more generally” (p.9).

The above extract points to the need for adequate ELP for work and more general purposes beyond graduation. Additional recommendations in the document suggest that universities should have “ongoing dialogue with professional accreditation and registration bodies about their expectations regarding English language proficiency and the English language proficiency of the university’s graduates” so that “the university knows the extent to which employers are satisfied with the English language proficiency and communication skills of its graduates” (DEEWR, 2009, p.13). This principle also considers ELP in tandem with communication skills as a graduate attribute, a topic we will return to later.
Although some institutions arguably interpreted the GPPs as standards (Barrett-Lennard et al., 2011), the GPPs were largely aspirational (Martin, 2011) and not enforceable. They were also problematic in that they were aimed solely at international students, though the report stated that “the Principle holds equally for international students as for domestic students” (p.9). The research literature therefore suggested inherent tensions in the principles (Harper, Prentice & Wilson, 2011; Murray, 2012). Indeed, the use of the term ‘international’ in the GPPs implied that language competence was an issue for this cohort but not for domestic students. This view obfuscates the reality of language competence, which is not necessarily dependent on the domestic/international labels. The GPPs were a major driver for change but further clarity and direction were still needed, including reference to all students.

The English Language Standards for Higher Education

In May 2012, the reconvened Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) steering committee released the English Language Standards for Higher Education (ELSHE) which re-drafted six of the original ten GPPs as standards (AUQA, 2012; Barthel, 2011). One key difference between the GPPs and the ELSHE is that the latter refer to all higher education providers – not only universities – and, perhaps more importantly, to all students. This is a critical shift and demonstrates that the debate has moved on substantially from the GPPs and their focus solely on international students.

Similar to the GPPs, the ELSHE focus on developing ELP during tertiary study, implying a cumulative competence over time and by graduation. Only principle number five relates specifically to ELP outcomes at exit (see right).

Rather than “an important graduate attribute” as described in the GPPs, the language has gained strength, now requiring institutions to ensure proficiency at graduation. On the one hand, this makes the evidencing of proficiency explicit, yet it raises the possibly more vexed question of what “appropriately proficient” means. It is unclear who will decide what is appropriate or how it will be measured. In the meantime, universities are endeavouring to meet the standards on the assumption that the TEQSA Standards Panel will adopt them in whole or in part and that a key focus in the standards will be ELP as a key graduate attribute.

Graduate attributes

A detailed discussion of graduate attributes is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the GPP report explicitly states that “English language proficiency is one part of the wider graduate attribute agenda since English language communication skills are crucial for graduate employment” (DEEWR, 2009, p.2). The TEQSA threshold standards similarly link ELP to graduate attributes (DIISTRE, 2011).

Core or ‘generic’ skills are listed by all universities under their graduate attributes, though much discussion and debate exists around them (Barrie, Hughes, Smith, 2009; Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann, 2004, Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell & Watts 2000). Currently, there is no systematic approach to embedding or tracking graduate attributes across courses or programs, though extensive work in the sector is being undertaken as part of the National Graduate Attributes Project (Barrie et al., 2009; Oliver, 2011) as well as in some individual institutions such as through the implementation of the Communication Skills Framework at the University of Western Australia (Barrett-Lennard, Chalmers & Longnecker, 2012).

Written and spoken communication skills are commonly listed in graduate attribute statements and the word “communication” was found to be the third most frequent in graduate attribute documentation nationally (Oliver, 2011). However, GPP number five suggests that “English language proficiency is sometimes treated as a ‘taken for granted’ element in communication skills [and therefore] by highlighting it in this Principle, the implications for university studies become clear” (DEEWR, 2009, p.9). Martin (2011) concurs that ELP is too embedded in the notion of ‘communication skills’ in graduate attribute statements.

ELP needs to be explicit in institutional statements and related policies. In order to do so, we need to consider the standard of ELP we are aiming for at the point of graduation.
The literature suggests that universities have given insufficient consideration to the levels of English language proficiency of graduates. Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth and Harris (2011) argue that “few measures are in place to ensure that graduating students have attained a level of proficiency that employers will accept” (p.103). Stappenbelt concurs, stating that:

“universities may not be doing enough to ensure that international students improve their English language levels to professional standards [and] it is a great disservice to international students if they were not enabled to develop adequate English language skills for professional employment in Australia by the time they graduate, should they so desire it” (Stappenbelt, 2008, p.116).

But what standard should be set? Dunworth (2010) contends that if universities were to set entry or exit standards for EAL students commensurate with native speakers, far fewer would obtain an Australian degree. Policy invariably lags behind practice and it has been suggested that the attachment to native English that still pervades academic life is at odds with the current reality of language use (Jenkins, 2011). According to Graddol (2006), 74% of communication in English is said to occur between non-native speakers. In this context, where English is conceptualised as ‘common property’ (Seidlhofer, 2007), what standard is acceptable for our students and their futures? Whilst it may not be possible or even desirable to demand that EAL students aim for ‘native speaker’ level ELP (Benzie, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Rampton, 1990), a level of expertise that is decoupled from this ‘gold standard’ has yet to be articulated for tertiary study. Graddol describes the apparently unassailable position of English as unlikely to continue, suggesting that English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) varieties of English will dominate in the next decade. Australia needs to consider where it wishes to position itself for this paradigm shift.

Universities do not currently have an agreed means for setting a standard of ELP for graduation and it has been suggested that desired outcomes from tertiary study have been largely driven by Graduate Skilled Migration requirements set by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). Arkoudis (2010) described this as “an acute case of the tail wagging the dog” and suggested that the higher education sector reclaim the agenda of language outcomes. Some institutions are beginning to consider the need for a specified exit standard but, to have any real traction, all stakeholders need to be made aware of it and, more importantly, to understand what it means in practical and measurable terms. Others have suggested specifying outcomes based on standardised test scores: Martin (2011) stated that UQ graduates should be aiming for IELTS 7.5, which “corresponds to current (bachelor) graduate attributes to convey ideas clearly and fluently in both written and spoken forms” (p.74). This raises the issue of how standards might be arrived at and who should be setting them. It also raises the question whether current views are based on an understanding of proficiency levels or on an aspirational view of IELTS 7.0 as the ‘holy grail’ of ELP due to minimum standards required for professional registration and migration.

**Professional registration and migration**

IELTS has been taken up by private bodies, professional associations and governments for a number of different purposes that require assessment of language (Merrifield, 2012). A significant change in migration policy in Australia in 2010 saw an increase in the language requirements for Graduate Skilled Migration (GSM) with a score of IELTS 6.0 no longer attracting points towards the application. Through this policy change, DIAC were sending a clear message that this level was only minimally adequate and that stronger language skills were desirable. This fundamental shift in migration policy resulted in “the effective severing of the nexus between study and permanent residence” (Knight, 2011, p.15). By replacing the Migration Occupation in Demand List (MODL) with the Skilled Migrant Selection Model (SkillSelect) and by increasing language requirements, supply is now said to be employer-driven rather than labour-driven (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

A large number of professional associations in Australia also use IELTS results as evidence that EAL applicants have met a designated ELP requirement for employment, registration or professional membership purposes. Such bodies regularly seek advice from the test owner and the process involves familiarisation with different levels of proficiency through band score and performance examples as well as discussion of a suitable level for the target context. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the organisation to set a score they consider appropriate. The majority of professions require IELTS Academic 7.0 (see appendix 1), and standards set are similar to those in other English-speaking countries. The above process suggests that employers and professional bodies are making informed decisions when standard setting. However, Arkoudis et al. (2012)
suggest that we require stronger evidence of the appropriateness of proficiency tests as indicators of workplace ELP. Arkoudis et al. (2009) also recommended that DEEWR consider supporting further research on the assessment of ELP requirements for trade sector employment, given the lack of data available to date. Further research is required in this area as there remain some unanswered questions.

Articulating a standard of ELP that is appropriate for the point of graduation has proved challenging to date. A logical first step would be to conceptualise a definition, nationally or institutionally, in terms that stakeholders understand for a common and consistent understanding of the construct of ELP (Dunworth, 2001). This leads us to consider existing definitions in the scholarly literature that might be drawn on.
Definitions and terminology related to ELP have posed challenges across the sector and there has been a tendency to rely on test scores to describe proficiency levels. The definition provided in the DEEWR GPP report is rather nebulous, for example, describing proficiency as:

“the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies. Such uses may range from a simple task such as discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience. This view of proficiency as the ability to organise language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of ‘English language proficiency’ from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure. The project Steering Committee recognises that in many contexts the terms ‘English language proficiency’ and ‘English language competence’ are used interchangeably”.

(DEEWR, 2009, p.1)

This definition does at least raise ELP beyond the sometimes narrowly-held conception of the most visible but more atomistic aspects of language related to sentence level grammatical competence, and it also usefully contextualises ELP in the university setting. It is clearly intended as a working definition for the non-specialist. It has, however, been criticised for its failure to capture important distinctions between ELP and academic literacy (Harper, Prentice & Wilson, 2011; Murray, 2012).

Three conceptual models of ELP have been proposed recently in the Australian higher education sector, each drawing on accepted theoretical frameworks of communicative competence (Bachman & Palmer, 2010) and/or academic literacy (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) in addition to ‘common-sense intuition’. Murray (2010) proposed a tripartite division of interacting competencies comprising ELP, academic literacy and professional communication skills. A robust response to his model by Harper, Prentice & Wilson critiqued it for its “vertical conception of language development”. Instead, Harper et al. (2011) offered their own model which aimed to show simultaneous development of everyday literacies, academic literacies and professional literacies. The ELP developmental continuum developed by O’Loughlin and Arkoudis (Arkoudis et al., 2012) differs from these previous two in that it focuses explicitly on ELP at varying stages of the degree: entry, experience (or during) and at exit. Despite disparities between the models, similarities can be extrapolated. Firstly, they each highlight the fact that ELP in higher education is complex and multidimensional. Secondly, they suggest that different stages of the student lifecycle may require a focus on a different dimension. Thirdly, an informal domain of general or everyday language appears necessary in addition to language for more formal academic or professional purposes, which is in line with the received view of language use as socially- and contextually-situated (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Hyland, 2007). This view also fits employers’ perceptions (Arkoudis et al., 2009), who identified both general and specific occupation language skills as necessary, including “high-level workplace communication skills with an emphasis on social and oral English, with literacy and cross-cultural skills” (Arkoudis et al., 2009, p.16). A key issue, however, is the difference in language use in different disciplines and professions with their varying norms and conventions (Hyland, 2007), and such diverse needs have hampered efforts to devise shared definitions.

The above discussion shows that ELP in higher education is being debated but that we are still struggling with our terminology and definitions. What is clear is that ELP in higher education settings is complex and challenging to define (Barrett-Lennard et al., 2011) and also that we have no agreed definition either of the construct itself or of the level of the construct that is appropriate (Dunworth, 2010; Webb, 2012). One recommendation from the 2007 symposium was that definitions should be developed to describe the competencies that employers were looking for in international graduates but this cannot be readily achieved until we arrive at a clearer understanding of what we are measuring. We need to agree whether we are chiefly concerned with discipline-specific academic English, the language skills required for employment, or both.
We turn now to evidencing ELP at graduation. One way in which this might be achieved is through explicit testing at around the time of graduation as formal certification of language ability. The exit testing literature comes largely from Hong Kong and Taiwan, with limited research in the Australian context.

Hong Kong & Taiwan

Hong Kong was one of the first locations to initiate large-scale free exit testing using a standardised test due to the perception that the English language skills of tertiary students was in decline. In 2002, the Common English Proficiency Assessment Scheme (CEPAS) was launched by the University Grants Committee (UGC). It was seen as offering many advantages such as to:

“encourage students to be more aware of proficiency in English; provide a common framework for assessing and documenting graduating students’ English proficiency; provide an internationally recognised assessment for students wishing to pursue further studies or entering the workforce; enable UGC to have a better understanding of students’ English abilities which will help in formulating its strategies in respect to language enhancement.” (Qian, 2007, p.101).

The committee approved the use of IELTS Academic in preference to the Graduating Students’ Language Proficiency Assessment (GSLPA) (Qian, 2007). Since that time, final year students from the eight local institutions who are studying a UGC-funded undergraduate degree are eligible to join the scheme on a voluntary basis. They may claim reimbursement of the test fee from their institution after taking the test. A number of research studies related to exit testing in Hong Kong have been published (Berry & Lewkowicz, 2000; Qi, 2004, 2005; Qian, 2007; Zhengdong, 2009), including an examination of alternatives to exit testing based on reporting competencies and a language portfolio (Berry & Lewkowicz, 2000). They indicate concern from the sector with some suggesting it may have negative washback3, particularly if the test is compulsory (Berry & Lewkowicz, 2000).

Over the first five years, mean Overall scores were reported to have improved from IELTS 6.46 to 6.64.

In Taiwan, due to similar concerns over deteriorating language abilities, the Ministry of Education has encouraged universities to set thresholds of language proficiency for their graduates since 2003 (Gong, 2009; Hsu, 2010; Pan, 2009; Pan & Newfields, 2011). While the government was unable to make it a mandatory requirement, the Ministry uses pass rates as an indicator of the university’s performance so, to all intents and purposes, it is compulsory. It set an aspirational goal of 50% of students reaching ‘intermediate’ level (CEFR 4 B1). Yet despite considerable government funding and the socio-economic advantage to students in attaining this level, very few universities were able to evidence more than 30% of their graduates reaching the standard (Pan, 2009). The literature suggests that at the macro level, the requirement is viewed positively by administrators, educators and even students (Pan, 2009). However, in practice, it was found that fundamental beliefs about English language teaching and learning – and therefore practices – did not change (Hsu, 2010; Tsai, 2009) and overall, the effect of exit testing in Taiwan was said to be superficial rather than substantial (Hsu, 2010; Pan & Newfields, 2011).

Hong Kong and Taiwan differ in many respects from the Australian context. Firstly, in Australia, EAL students join a cohort of peers who are predominantly English-speaking and where English, as the official language and the language of instruction, is a graduate expectation rather simply desirable. However, what is of interest in both of these Asian contexts is that the literature is dominated by papers related to impact while actual ELP outcomes are referenced far less frequently.

Australia

Exit testing is not currently widespread in Australia and the research is therefore rather limited. A desk audit of publicly available information on websites revealed that three Australian institutions have implemented exit testing in recent years, all using IELTS. Griffith University undertook initial internal research in 2007 supported by a grant from IELTS Australia (Humphreys & Mousavi, 2010) and institution-wide exit testing under the name IELTS4grads was implemented in 2008 as one component of the broader Griffith English Language Enhancement Strategy (Griffith University, 2012). The test may be taken three months either side of degree conferral and a test fee subsidy is available to eligible students (www.griffith.edu.au/ielts4grads). Ethical approval was obtained prior to commencement and the data is used for research purposes. Survey data from 2010 and 2011 showed that 50% of the applicants accessed IELTS4grads

3 “Washback refers to the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences teachers and learners to do things that they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning” (Messick, 1996, p.241).

4 Common European Framework of Reference
for migration purposes and a further 21% for employment in Australia, showing that the majority accessed the initiative to be able to remain in Australia after graduation (Humphreys, 2010; Humphreys, 2011).

This is consistent with large-scale evidence of the popularity of remaining in Australia after tertiary study for EAL students (Arkoudis et al., 2009), though the recent change in visa policy may impact this figure in the future.

The University of Queensland implemented the Graduate Exit IELTS Test in 2008 as a supplementary graduate attribute (University of Queensland, 2012a, 2012b). The test fee subsidy is provided by the University. No further information is publicly available on the outcomes of this initiative. In 2012, the University of New England (UNE, 2012) commenced exit testing using IELTS, offering fixed dates each semester for its graduating students. The University of Melbourne and University of Technology Sydney have also conducted one-off exit tests for research purposes (see next section) and it is possible that other universities have undertaken similar but unpublished research.

Research findings in Australia

The literature in the Australian context is relatively limited. Only the studies conducted by O’Loughlin & Arkoudis (2009) and Craven (2012) trace proficiency over the course of an entire university degree in the Australian context using official IELTS pre- and post-test scores. O’Loughlin & Arkoudis found that the greatest gains were in Reading and Listening and that the lowest scores were typically obtained in Writing, though not all students improved in all skills. Craven’s study also demonstrated strong variability in outcomes, with some students making no progress between pre- and post-testing and with no clear predictor for improvement. The extant literature to date reveals that, while some students do improve, there is no guarantee that acquisition will occur during higher education studies (Craven, 2012; Humphreys, Haugh, Fenton-Smith, Lobo, Michael & Walkinshaw, 2012; O’Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). These findings are consistent with existing score gain studies outside of the higher education sector, which have shown that proficiency gains are not linear and that “improvements seen in mean scores do not apply equally at all band levels” (Green, 2005, p.11). Studies consistently show that language acquisition occurs more easily at lower levels of proficiency, with IELTS 6.0 operating as a threshold or plateau level beyond which it is hard to progress (Craven, 2012; Elder & O’Loughlin, 2003; Humphreys & Mousavi, 2010; O’Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). Craven argues that stakeholders need to be aware of the difficulty in progressing to IELTS 7.0; that is, to ‘proficient user’ or CEFR C1 (Council of Europe, 2001, 2006).

The use of standardised tests

In view of the fact that a number of universities have chosen to implement standardised testing at the point of graduation, the pros and cons of such an approach should be considered. On the positive side, exit testing using a standardised test can provide a consistent cross-program or cross-institutional method of assessing and documenting graduating ELP. Large-scale standardised ELP tests were created for global audiences and are understood by a variety of stakeholders and they therefore have face validity as well as utility to the student beyond graduation. An exit test provides a snapshot of language proficiency rather than achievement (Mousavi, 2009; Richards & Schmidt, 2010) and therefore of ‘absolute’ attainment. Depending on the conditions of its use, a test at graduation can have positive washback in that it may incentivise students to develop their language ability and/or encourage academics to support ELP development due to increased accountability. Test scores can also be provided as evidence of ELP to employers and professional bodies.

For the individual institution, exit testing provides an expedient method of evidencing ELP (resources notwithstanding). Assurance comes from externalising the assessment to professional test developers whose core business it is to assess ELP, thus removing any real or perceived conflict of interest that institutions may face in declaring ELP outcomes. It also allows institutions to offer a value-added graduate attainment, possibly as a point of differentiation. Additionally, the findings from exit testing allow institutions to gather local quantitative evidence which may be used to inform aspects of ELP policy and practice. This assumes that samples are representative and can be generalised from, which may not be the case if testing is voluntary.

There are, however, mixed views in the English language community regarding exit testing. Implementing exit testing for the assessment of ELP is certainly not a panacea. On a practical level, subsidised exit testing can be costly and institutions need to consider the ongoing resourcing required. Institutions also need to consider the appropriacy of testing ELP in isolation since a one-off test has limited capacity in comparison to the cumulative evidence that is gathered over the course of a degree. It has been suggested that the adoption of a single test may lead to reductionism (Dunworth, 2001; Shohamy, 2007b) and the literature suggests that assessing skills within the discipline (whether academic literacy, graduate attributes or ELP) may be a more effective approach. The question has also been raised whether it is appropriate to require students to demonstrate ELP at the end of a course when they have successfully completed a degree which was taught and assessed in English (O’Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009).
A further argument is that testing in itself will not develop language competence, which occurs cumulatively across the study period. Testing is likely to have little effect on levels of ELP unless the outcomes impact the right to graduate, and research studies into generic high-stakes testing indicate that it may be detrimental to learning (Chapman & Synder, 2000; Smith, 1991; Wall, 2000). Exit testing might therefore best be used as one component in a broader set of initiatives such as in the Griffith English Language Enhancement Strategy (Griffith University, 2012).

The main area of concern for those against exit testing is based around validity. Some have questioned the use of large-scale proficiency tests as they claim that such instruments were not originally designed for this use. O’Loughlin (2008) commented that:

“the IELTS and the TOEFL have recently been employed for the accreditation of health professionals and also proposed as university exit tests without any serious attempt to validate them for either purpose. The uses of both tests are therefore considered by many language-testing specialists to be unethical.”

Arkoudis (2010) suggested that IELTS has been filling the gap by default because there is no agreed framework or set of standards in the sector, suggesting that we do not know whether IELTS is “a genuine indicator of graduates’ language-readiness for their careers and professions”. Belleville’s response to the above comment asserted that the General Training version of IELTS was indeed designed for work purposes (Belleville, 2011) and that, therefore, it is not a case of retrofitting⁵. He added that, while universities were actively choosing IELTS to demonstrate ELP at graduation, “IELTS does not claim to be an indicator of graduates’ language readiness for their chosen careers and professions [because] there is a range of factors that contribute to work readiness”. This latter comment again suggests that an ELP test score might best be employed as one source of evidence of workplace readiness in a multi-faceted approach, a suggestion that has also been made regarding entry requirements to university (O’Loughlin, 2011).

Clearly the consequential aspects of test use need to be considered. Bachman & Palmer (2010) assert that test developers need to demonstrate that the assessment is justified for its intended use. It has also been suggested that tests should not be utilised simply as policy tools (Shohamy, 2007a; Shohamy, 2007b; Shohamy & McNamara, 2009). Several academics have called for more research to validate the use of standardised global tests as a measure of workplace readiness (Arkoudis et al., 2009; O’Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). Some test owners are funding research in related areas so as to ensure that their tests remain relevant and useful to a wide range of stakeholders in varying contexts (Merrifield, 2012; Moore, Morton & Wallis, in preparation; Murray, Cruikshank & Cross, in preparation).

Arkoudis stated that “any kind of testing that is not connected directly to disciplinary learning will not pass muster” (2011). One possible solution might therefore be discipline-specific or occupation-specific tests. However, this also poses numerous challenges. Firstly, quality specific-purpose tests do not currently exist in all fields. Notable exceptions include the Occupational English Test (www.occupationalenglishtest.org) - an Australian-owned and developed test accepted for registration for the medical professions - and a number of specific-purpose exams are administered by Cambridge ESOL (www.cambridgeesol.org/exams). But a fundamental issue in testing for specific purposes is that the more specific the test, the less possible it is to generalise to other language use domains including, for example, the language needed for social interaction with colleagues or clients in the work context (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Douglas, 2000; Ingham & Thighe, 2006).

Many of the arguments against a standardised ELP test have also been made for generic skills testing such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) (TEQSA, 2011a) due to concern that discipline content could be overshadowed by the teaching and testing of generic skills. TEQSA suggest that “there is good reason to be cautious about such testing for the purposes of regulation” (TEQSA, 2011a, p.19) yet increasingly governments, the professions, business and the wider community demand assurance of outcomes standards (Oliver, 2011).

In summary, exit testing, if used, is likely to be more appropriate as one source of evidence as part of a more holistic approach to developing ELP. In this way, we ensure that the test remains the indicator of the outcome rather than the outcome itself. It has been suggested that more sophisticated methods are needed at exit than at entry (Arkoudis, 2011) and that a more nuanced and complex mechanism is required. It is to these possible alternatives that we now turn.

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⁵ Taking a test that was designed for one purpose and using it for another (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007)
Statements of ELP

The need for explicit acknowledgement of ELP as a graduate attribute has already been articulated in this paper. Some universities have already linked ELP explicitly to graduate attribute policies. ELP standards need to be clear both in policies and in student-facing statements. Integration with the work already being undertaken in relation to graduate attributes would result in a more coherent approach and avoid ELP being perceived as a discrete “skill”.

A standards framework

In 2011, Arkoudis suggested that work was needed to develop an explicit framework for describing language standards (2011). Although the long-term goal would be to reach an explicit standard by graduation, such an approach would provide incremental goals along the way. A holistic model that scaffolds ELP development across programs would ensure it was integral rather than peripheral to disciplinary studies (Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012). This approach would assist all stakeholders in developing awareness and realistic expectations for different stages, culminating in discipline-specific expectations that were highest towards the latter part of the degree.

While no framework for developing ELP currently exists (Barret-Lennard et al., 2011), there are examples of good practice in the area of academic literacy in which the development of ELP is implicit.

Examples of Good Practice

The Communication Skills Framework
The University of Western Australia developed the first communication skills framework in 2009, which maps skills across four levels (‘beginning’, ‘developing’, ‘advanced’ and ‘professional’) and across four ‘dimensions’ (written, oral, critical information literacy and interpersonal skills). Outcomes at graduation focus at the ‘advanced’ and ‘professional’ stages (Barrett-Lennard, Chalmers & Longnecker, 2011; Chalmers, Barrett-Lennard & Longnecker, 2010).

The Academic Literacy Development Framework
Harper (2011) devised the Academic Literacy Development Framework, which focuses on academic literacy and a staged development across the degree. This framework is being used at Deakin University as a professional development tool in a project funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP): Developing academic literacies in your course curriculum (V. Rosario, personal communication, February 6, 2013).

CEFR levels as exiting standards
Curtin University engaged an English Language Proficiency Advisor to set standards of ELP at various stages of the degree including at exit using CEFR levels and descriptors. This aims to support the staged development of task-related ELP from CEFR B2 at commencement to CEFR C1 at exit over a three-year degree and to CEFR C2 over a four-year degree (D. Butorac, personal communication, February 4, 2013).

A framework which explicitly articulates ELP expectations would be a logical first step, though the additional work required to implement it cannot be underestimated. This work would necessitate a whole-of-institution approach and considerable resources. Ideally, it would draw on the expertise of Academic Language & Learning (ALL) specialists, though there can be challenges with academics and ALL specialists working together (Chanock, 2011) and with agreeing an appropriate and workable level of collaboration (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Such frameworks can also be complex and challenging to use. Training would be required for academics so as to ensure reliable assessment. Some scholars have also questioned whether these frameworks lead to effective learning outcomes as students may not understand them (Sadler, 1998, 2005). There is the additional consideration of whether the standards should be related to the world of academia, the world of work or both.
Assessment rubric

Due to the potential positive washback, one option is to build expectations of ELP into assessment criteria with progressive standards across degrees (Arkoudis et al., 2012). This would ensure that ELP was highly visible to academic staff and students. It may not be realistic or necessary to do so in every course but a targeted approach in core subjects, capstone units or at meaningful points in the student life cycle may be practicable.

Example of Good Practice

At Curtin University, CEFR descriptors are being integrated as assessment criteria for ELP in course assessment tasks across the faculties.

However, this approach brings several challenges such as identifying the skills and knowledge that we expect at each stage and for each discipline. Many discipline academics already include a general criterion related to the quality of the communication, though rarely explicitly ELP. Criterion-referenced⁶, analytical scoring⁷ results in an average score being awarded due to the trade-off between strengths and weaknesses across several areas⁸. If ELP were an explicit criterion, consideration would need to be given to the weighting of content versus other skills and whether it would be appropriate to set a minimum threshold of ELP that must be satisfied in order to pass an assessment item or course. Other issues emerge such as who would write the criteria (expert, committee) or how consistent application of the ‘standard’ would be assured, whether onshore or offshore.

Capstone courses or experiences

Capstone courses typically occur in the final year of undergraduate programs to ensure that graduates have developed all the skills expected. In this way, capstone experiences aim to evidence the culmination of technical disciplinary skills, academic language and learning skills and employability skills. It may be possible to link ELP at this juncture to workplace skills by working with external stakeholders and through partnerships with internal specialists such as Career Advisors and Academic Language & Learning specialists.

Example of Good Practice

The University of Canberra language policy (2012) states that Course Convenors should “include opportunities for capstone experiences in their course design, in which students are asked to demonstrate the expected level of English language”.

Language portfolios

Berry and Lewkovicz (2000) suggested a language portfolio as an alternative to a standardised test in the Hong Kong context. Portfolio assessment comes with numerous advantages such as the opportunity for students to revise and improve their work and it is considered to be a more learner-centred approach than more traditional forms of assessment. This option might draw on work related to the European Language Portfolio, developed by the Council of Europe in 2001 which is anchored to CEFR levels (Shärer, 2000) (www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp).

Example of Good Practice

The European Language Portfolio gathers evidence of language ability in a portfolio comprising three sections: a Language Passport (self-assessed proficiency against a CEFR checklist), a Language Biography (a description of knowledge and learning experiences) and a Language Dossier of learners’ work. It draws on the principle of assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning (Little, 2009). Over one hundred institutions across many European countries have had portfolios validated since inception with a small number of models validated in the vocational and higher education contexts (http://www.cercles.org/en/main.html).

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⁶ A judgement made against specific criteria rather than by comparing to others in the group.
⁷ Each criterion is judged separately rather than awarding an overall score.
⁸ This is known as a ‘compensatory composite score’ (Bachman & Palmer, 2010) or a ‘conjunctive approach’ (Sadler, 2005).
However, portfolios pose numerous challenges. They are time-consuming to create and difficult to rate in a standardised way. They are more likely to demonstrate written ability than spoken. There is also the issue of finding a credible means of ensuring the work was completed by the student who submits it; some aspects may therefore need to be completed under timed conditions, which may add to the assessment burden. Additionally, stakeholders (e.g., employers) may not be convinced of the value of an approach that involves self-assessment or may feel unable to interpret the results in a consistent manner across applicants.

In summary, it must also be stated that ELP outcomes depend on standards of ELP at entry as well as on systematic in-course development as presented in Discussion Paper 2 in this series (Dunworth, 2013). It is the cumulative development of ELP across entire programs that leads to acquisition by graduation. If initiatives such as those suggested above are implemented, considerable institutional commitment is required. Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson (2012) suggested that institutional commitment was, in fact, one of three critical areas for ensuring ELP standards. Many are long-term and resource-intensive and consideration would need to be given to sustainability as well as the constraints, affordances and needs of the institution. The effectiveness of any initiative would also depend on engagement from all stakeholders, including students. As Leask and Wallace (2011) suggest, “the acquisition of English language competency is a joint venture and a shared goal” (p.27).
A key issue identified in the 2007 discussion paper was the impact of language outcomes on subsequent education, such as postgraduate study. International students are a substantial proportion of the postgraduate coursework cohort, making up fifty per cent of the all coursework masters enrolments in Australia, yet far less is known about postgraduate outcomes generally (AUSSE Research Briefing, 2011). Research into language standards has tended to focus on EAL students as an homogenous group and predominantly on undergraduates, though research may be underway in individual institutions such as the work being conducted at Griffith University (Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, in preparation; Humphreys & Fenton-Smith, in preparation).

The limited research related specifically to the ELP of postgraduate EAL students suggests that they experience similar language difficulties to undergraduates (Carroll, 2005) but that prior English language learning experiences are said to impact on their ability to cope with the demand characteristics of their courses (Brown, 2007; Sawir, 2005). The commencing level of postgraduate students is largely unreported in the literature and there is also a paucity of research into the exiting outcomes of this cohort. However, O’Loughlin & Arkoudis (2009) found level of study to be a key factor in outcomes at graduation, finding that less improvement was made across the degree by postgraduate students than undergraduates. Internal reports of IELTS4grads at Griffith University also identified little difference between the outcomes of postgraduates and undergraduates (Humphreys, 2010; Humphreys, 2011; Humphreys & Mousavi, 2010). This more limited improvement may be due to the difficulty of moving proficiency to CEFR C1 or it may be due to the shorter time in which acquisition can occur in postgraduate programs.

Little is known about whether students are linguistically prepared for postgraduate study or whether the location (onshore or offshore), the medium of instruction or the discipline of the first degree impact language standards. Nor is the impact known of “language of instruction” policies, which mean that students who have undertaken adequate prior learning in English are exempt from evidencing ELP by formal means. This is standard practice in Australia but it means that some students may be commencing subsequent programs of study below the minimum entry requirement. More research needs to be undertaken in relation to postgraduate language standards in particular.
Many international students studying in Australia seek work experience to complement their Australian qualification and build a career portfolio to enhance their employment prospects either in Australia or elsewhere. English language competence is closely linked to the successful transition of Australian international graduates into the Australian labour market (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Birrell, 2006; DEEWR, 2009). Reports suggesting that significant numbers of international students graduate without the necessary English language skills to work in their field of qualification have led to much debate surrounding the English language standards at Australian universities (Barthel, 2012; Birrell, 2006; Trounson, 2011; Victorian Ombudsman, 2011). With international students placing growing importance on acquiring post-study work experience, English language competency in the context of graduate employment has become an important issue for Australian universities.

Employer perceptions and expectations of ELP

Employers often include English language skills and communication skills under the broad banner of ‘employability’ skills. Other employability skills include self-management, initiative, problem solving and teamwork (Brown et al., 2003). An examination of the literature reveals that employers in both Australia and other countries place great importance on English language and communication skills when recruiting graduates (Eurobarometer, 2010; Graduate Careers Australia, 2012; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). This emphasis spans many disciplines and includes engineering, business and health-related fields, which are popular fields of study for international students in Australia. However, despite placing importance on communication, many employers harbour concerns over the English language ability of international graduates and believe more needs to be done to improve the language and communication skills in order to prepare them for employment (Birrell & Healy, 2008; Maslen, 2008; Trevelyan & Tilli, 2010; Victorian Ombudsman, 2011).

A recent study of Australian employers’ perceptions and expectations of graduates in the health, engineering and accounting fields indicates that confident verbal and written English language is a critical factor in graduate employment. The study, which examined issues surrounding the employment of international graduates in the latter fields, revealed lack of English language competence to be one of the main reasons why many international graduates struggle to find employment in their field of qualification after graduation (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012).

Employers have high expectations of graduates. Employers are looking for graduates who have a confident command of English and are comfortable expressing their ideas freely in a team environment. Graduates need communication skills that can span a range of workplace situations. For example, engineers need to be able to communicate on the shop floor as well as with clients and suppliers while accounting graduates need the ability to communicate accounting information, elicit information from clients, provide professional advice, and communicate with people at all levels. A number of the large accounting and professional services companies have introduced strict rules surrounding English language, with many requiring IELTS 8.0 across the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. One mid-size accounting firm described verbal communication as critical and the reason why the company had not yet hired an international graduate:

The question I ask is: ‘can I see this person as someone who in the short to medium term that I can have sit in front of a client one on one?’ And if they’re able to achieve that then to me I’ll move forward. So it comes down then to a language issue. Because it’s not only being able to understand an individual, it’s being able to then talk technically also and use technical terms which are appropriate in front of a client. I need them to be able to talk on the phone and present themselves like any other member in the firm. (Interview with a partner in a mid-size accounting firm, 2012.)

Graduate nurses must feel confident conversing with other hospital staff as well as with patients in what can be highly stressful and emotional circumstances. One manager of a large nursing recruitment agency described the importance of graduates having confident communication skills to survive in the workplace:

Graduate nurses must feel confident conversing with other hospital staff as well as with patients in what can be highly stressful and emotional circumstances. One manager of a large nursing recruitment agency described the importance of graduates having confident communication skills to survive in the workplace:

We are looking for staff who we believe are articulate and confident enough with their English language that they can actually work in an Australian hospital where nurses are notoriously tough to each other. There’s an expression that nurses eat their young and it’s horrible, but it’s true. We’re very critical of each other. (Interview with a manager of a large Australian nursing recruitment agency, 2012.)
Written communication skills are also highly valued by employers. According to a survey conducted by Consult Australia, an industry association for consulting companies in the built environment sector, low levels of written communication skills remain an ongoing challenge amongst graduates (Consult Australia, 2011). Graduates need to be able to write confidently and in the appropriate tone and style. One human resources manager at a medium sized engineering firm described the importance of written language for engineers:

> English language both written and spoken is important...especially for engineers, it isn’t just the drawing anymore. They’ve often got to, in our business, supply quality documentation or correspond back and forth with customers. (Interview with an HR manager of a mid-sized engineering firm, 2012.)

### Professional bodies perceptions and expectations around ELP

According to many of the professional bodies, employability skills are key factors in successful labour market integration. A survey of 500 CEOs conducted by the Australian Industry Group (AIG) and Deloitte revealed that employers consider employability skills (33.1%) and a positive attitude (32.6%) to be the most important factors when they are recruiting graduates (AIG & Deloitte, 2009). In a survey of 400 professional groups by the University of Western Sydney, being able to communicate effectively was considered one of the most important graduate capabilities. However, despite emphasising the ability to communicate effectively, many employers surveyed were dissatisfied with the communication skills of graduates (Grebennikov & Shah, 2008).

Professional bodies have also expressed concern over the standard of English competency among Australian international graduates. According to the Business Council of Australia, “the opportunity for businesses to employ international students once they graduate had not been fully utilised in Australia because of lack of English language skills” (Business Council of Australia, 2008). Concern over English language has resulted in some professional bodies such as the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, CPA Australia and the Institute of Chartered Accountants setting their own language standards for former international students seeking to work in Australia. In some cases, these remain higher than the universities’ standards (CPA Australia, 2012; ICAA, 2010; Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2010).

### Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Current research in Australia and overseas suggests students who undertake relevant work experience during their degree are more employable on graduation (Billett, 2009; Gamble, Patrick & Peach, 2010; Royal Academy of Engineering, 2010). While there is widespread agreement that participation in WIL enhances employability, studies in Australia suggest that poor English language and communication skills are preventing many international students from accessing work integrated learning (WIL) programs (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Feltcher & Pretto, 2008). For example, many WIL programs at Australian universities require students to source their own placement, a daunting task for international students who may lack confidence in their communication abilities. In turn, employers are often reluctant to take on international students because of a perceived lack of essential cultural knowledge, understanding of the Australian work context and perceived deficiencies in English language competence (Patrick et al., 2008).

Admission to many university industry-based learning (IBL) programs is predicated on above average academic results followed by a rigorous selection progress that mimics a job application. Entry to ‘elite’ internship programs is often limited to a small number of high performing students. However, WIL coordinators defend tough entry requirements, explaining that English proficiency is critical to a successful placement. Employers have high expectations surrounding English language competence and the majority of host organisations lack the time and resources to support students with inadequate English language skills. Importantly, university staff are reluctant to place international students who do not meet acceptable language standards for fear of damaging important relationships with industry (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012).

Mandatory placements, such as those found in nursing and engineering, produce multiple challenges for international students, university staff and host employers (Mackay, Harding, Jurlina, Scobie, Khan, 2011). In a study of international nursing students at three Australian universities, academics at all three sites cited poor English language skills as one of the major issues for nursing students on clinical placements. In response to high numbers of international students failing their clinical placement, one university introduced an English for Health Sciences course (Blackmore, Farrell, Devlin, Arber, Gribble & Rahimi, 2010-2012). In engineering, lack of local opportunities leads many international students to complete placements in their home country where there is no language barrier and students are better networked. However, this does not provide students with the much sought-after Australian work experience, exposure to Australian work culture or the opportunity to hone their English language skills. In sum, many international students find themselves in a catch 22 situation. They are frequently the student group who are likely to benefit most from a WIL placement; however, under-developed English language skills seriously impact on their capacity to participate.
Professional Year

Introduced in 2009, the Professional Year is a structured professional development program in the accounting, computer science and engineering disciplines, mandated by the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. Professional Year programs are managed by peak industry bodies but delivered through a network of approved education providers. The Professional Year program combines formal learning and workplace experience (DIAC, 2012). English language requirements vary between providers. Most providers require an IELTS 6.0 across all four skills. However, some providers also assess English language competence during an admissions interview. While Professional Year programs do not focus specifically on English language, teaching participants how to communicate effectively and professionally in the Australian workplace is a key goal. In addition, many programs employ instructors with some TESOL experience so that English language support is embedded in the programs (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012).

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) is currently reviewing the success of the Professional Year program and considering the role of the program once the new post-study work visa is introduced in 2013. Information provided by some Professional Year providers suggests that the combination of ‘soft skills’ and workplace experience is achieving positive outcomes. According to one Professional Year provider, successful completion of the Professional Year at least doubles student’s chances of employment in their chosen profession, while 83% of participants at another Professional Year provider were employed in their chosen profession six months after graduation (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012).

Implications for Australian tertiary institutions

The growing demand for access to relevant work experience opportunities by international students, along with the mounting importance placed on ‘soft skills’ by employers, raises the question of whose role it is to teach employability skills. While some maintain the current focus on graduate employability is undermining the true purpose of higher education institutions, which is to further students’ understanding of the world and pass on a body of knowledge from one generation to the other (Williams, 2012), others insist that institutions have a responsibility to ensure graduates are ‘work ready’. Many universities claim that upon graduation students from their institution will be able to demonstrate a particular set of attributes. Universities making such claims need to carefully examine how their students develop important graduate skills and attributes, including critical communication skills, during their program.

Engagement with the local community

Many university staff believe international students must be made aware from the outset of the importance of acquiring ‘soft skills’ and developing important employability skills (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012). While there are many ways to promote English language acquisition in the classroom (Arkoudis et al., 2010), greater involvement in the local community is considered critical if international students are to improve their English language and communication skills and enhance their understanding of local culture. A key finding of research conducted by Australian Education International (AEI) indicates that there is much scope to improve interactions between international students and local students on and off campus, and to support international students to engage more fully with the broader Australian community (AEI, 2012). Supporting and expanding opportunities for social engagement allows international students to practise their English and make social and academic connections beyond their field of study. Importantly, programs and activities that encourage international students to mix with local students and the community are likely to improve the employment outcomes of international students. Volunteering, sport, part-time employment and other extracurricular activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh award provide valuable networking opportunities and are looked upon favourably by employers seeking the ‘all-rounder’ (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012).

Career education

Career education has emerged as a major theme in one study investigating international students’ transition into the Australian labour market (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012). University staff, employers and international students all concur that more needs to be done to improve students’ knowledge of Australian and global labour markets and their understanding of local recruitment practices, as well as to enhance communication and ‘soft’ skills. International students often have a poor understanding of the job application process, falling at the first hurdle due to poorly written job applications. It is common for employers to conduct initial interviews over the phone so being able to communicate confidently in this situation is also essential. Career
advisors at three Australian universities suggested that career planning for both international and domestic students should commence in their first and not final year as most often occurs (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012). Furthermore, the greater integration of career education into the academic curriculum would allow students to begin researching career options earlier, promote the assessment and review of key skills and encourage students to work towards employment goals.

Resourcing WIL

Given the demand for WIL among international students, universities can do much more to both expand WIL opportunities and enhance pre-placement preparation. Much of the WIL literature highlights the importance of pre-placement preparation. Indeed one of the key findings of a major report on WIL in Australia is that “merely providing practice-based experiences for students is insufficient unless those experiences are enriched through preparation, engagement and opportunities to share and reconcile what has been contributed by these experiences” (Billett, 2009). Adequate preparation is not only critical to the success of an internship or work placement, it is also vital in enhancing the overall employment prospects of all international graduates. An important part of WIL preparation includes developing key workplace communication skills, interview techniques and resumé writing.

Many WIL academics believe it needs to take a more prominent place and that universities needs to play a far greater role in supporting and resourcing WIL in a range of programs. Some have advocated a tiered approach where students enhance their employability skills throughout their university program. In first year, students participate in a compulsory volunteer program where the emphasis is on engaging with the local community and improving communication skills. In second year, students participate in an unpaid internship in their discipline area, while in their final year, the focus is on obtaining a paid work placement. The focus is on achieving incremental growth with students required to attend compulsory career development workshops and seminars from first year (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012). While a program such as this is resource-intensive, it is likely to lead to improved graduate outcomes, thus delivering significant benefits to universities. Given the growing importance placed on gaining work experience by international students, as well as the promises being made by institutions surrounding the provision of practical experience, there is mounting evidence to suggest that providing meaningful discipline-related work experience needs to be given high priority within broader university strategy.

Australian employers have set the bar very high for international graduates seeking to obtain post-study employment in their field. While some involved in graduate recruitment describe employer expectations as unrealistic, the healthy supply of graduates in many disciplines suggests that employers will continue to be well-placed to select the best possible graduate from a large pool of applicants. During the selection process, non-technical skills will play a key role in determining successful graduate outcomes. As one senior manager in a large Australian engineering firm explained, “we’re not looking for who’s the best engineer. The degrees have sorted that out to some extent. It’s how do they (graduates) cope in that communication area, the soft skills? How can you be an effective team member with your technical toolbox under your arm?” (Blackmore et al., 2010-2012). In the current employment climate, Australian international graduates need to demonstrate key employability skills such as the ability to communicate in a range of workplace settings. Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that employers look favourably on relevant industry experience and that work experience opportunities are instrumental in enhancing employability. To improve their chances of success in the Australian labour market, international students require access to work placements along with a level of English language competence necessary to successfully integrate into the Australian labour market.
At this juncture, we revisit the issues raised in the 2007 Discussion Paper and reflect on what has been addressed in the intervening period.

1. The lack of empirical evidence or mechanisms to audit ELP and academic progression during degrees. Research has been undertaken in the intervening period, including attempts to measure ELP via standardised exit testing. A range of other mechanisms for supporting and measuring ELP have also been developed and implemented in some institutions. However, this may be localised and the extent of systematic auditing of ELP during studies and at graduation remains unclear.

2. The impact of ELP on subsequent study. The impact on further study has received little attention according to the published literature and there still remains a considerable gap in our knowledge in relation to this cohort.

3. The impact of ELP on employment outcomes. According to the literature, there is a widespread view among key stakeholders that international students are graduating without the English language competency and communication skills needed to successfully transition into the Australian labour market. It is clear that international students see the benefits of relevant work experience in order to enhance their employment outcomes in their home country and improve their prospects of gaining permanent residency in Australia but that ELP is considered a barrier to participation in WIL initiatives.

4. The lack of certainty regarding the level of ELP desired by employers; specifically, the lack of certainty regarding the required ELP level needed for effective performance in vocational fields and trades. It is now evident that employers have high expectations of graduates, emphasising ‘employability’ skills such as English language and communication skills. The importance of social/everyday ELP and ‘cultural fit’ to the workplace has also been highlighted. Current evidence suggests that a range of professional bodies set ELP standards after undergoing a standard-setting process. There is still limited knowledge regarding the required level for effective performance in vocational fields and trades.

5. The interconnection of international education and skilled migration programs This concern appears to have been largely addressed as a result of recent migration policy changes

We have undoubtedly made progress in the years since the 2007 national symposium. The introduction of the GPPs resulted in considerable institutional effort to support the development of ELP and the policy context continues to influence initiatives in this area. A heightened focus is evident in the literature and research. However, it is clear that not all the issues identified have been fully addressed and that there is still work to be done before we can confidently say that “all students who graduate have the requisite skills and knowledge and capabilities to advance to further study or employment” (Arkoudis et al., 2012, p.156). It is unlikely that any single initiative will suffice but it is certainly time to ensure that ELP development is given attention across the sector and that it is viewed as a shared responsibility and whole-of-institution issue. Experts such as Academic Language and Learning specialists should be central in related discussions so that we might work collaboratively towards improved outcomes for our graduates and safeguard the reputation of our degrees. How this is achieved will depend, in part, on the regulatory framework and the forthcoming standards introduced by TEQSA and ASQA.
CRITICAL ISSUES

- How can we unpack the complexity of ELP so that we can have a shared understanding of the construct? Can we, in fact, reconcile disciplinary differences as well as in-course and post-course language needs?
- What policy and practice initiatives would ensure that ELP is developed and assessed as a key and integral competence, resulting in genuine improvements in outcomes by graduation?
- How can we improve integrated career education and access to discipline-specific WIL experiences for a seamless transition to better meet stakeholders’ expectations?
- How can we (better) engage key institutional stakeholders (policy makers; academics; students) in these issues?
- What do we hope to have achieved in the next five years and what further research evidence might support this?
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

Table 1: IELTS minimum requirements for professional registration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional body</th>
<th>IELTS minimum overall score</th>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA)</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>N.B. Each health profession also has a national board which sets the IELTS requirement for registration. The majority have set the minimum at IELTS 7.0.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Public Accountants, Institute of Chartered Accountants</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Academic or General Training</td>
<td>For the Graduate Skilled visa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPA, Institute of Public Accountants, Institute of Chartered Accountants</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>For permanent migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPMG, Deloitte, PWC</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>For employment with the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects Accreditation Council of Australia</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Academic or General Training</td>
<td>For accreditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Engineers Australia</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Academic or General Training</td>
<td>For assessment for skilled migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Association of Social Workers</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>For professional membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>For assessment for skilled migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law boards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Legal Profession Admission Board</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Minimum 7.0 listening, 7.0 reading, 8.0 writing, 7.5 speaking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Legal Practice Board of WA</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Minimum 8.0 for writing, 7.5 for speaking and 7.0 for reading and listening.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Established in 1992, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) is the national industry association for private providers of post-compulsory education and training. ACPET has almost 1,000 members nationally delivering a full range of higher and vocational education and training (VET) and English language courses across all States and Territories, and internationally.

ACPET’s mission is to enhance quality, choice and innovation in Australian education and training. It represents a range of independent providers, including commercial and not-for-profit entities, community groups, and industry and enterprise-based organisations. ACPET works with governments, other education and training providers, industries, and community organisations, to ensure vocational and higher education and training services are well targeted, accessible and well delivered.

As the peak body for private education and training providers, ACPET is committed to ensuring that its policies, products and services contribute to an inclusive tertiary education system.

www.acpet.edu.au

Cambridge English: Advanced

Cambridge English: Advanced is a secure, international test of English targeted at the level for academic success. It is recognised by over 3,000 organisations globally, including the majority of universities and colleges in Canada, Australia and the UK. It is also accepted for student visas in Australia and the UK. Cambridge English: Advanced is globally available at 1,300 exam centres on more than 33 dates per year.

Cambridge English Language Assessment develops and produces the most valuable range of qualifications for learners and teachers of English in the world. Around 4 million people take Cambridge English exams each year in 130 countries. More than 13,000 universities, employers, government ministries and immigration authorities accept our certificates. We are part of the University of Cambridge and a not-for-profit organisation.

www.CambridgeESOL.org/Advanced
English Australia

English Australia is the national peak body for the English language sector of international education in Australia. English Australia represents over 100 member colleges throughout Australia that provide quality English language programs to students and professionals from around the world.

Over 80% of international students learning English in Australia choose to study with an English Australia member college.

As an association, English Australia has a focus on:

■ representing member colleges whose core business is English language teaching;
■ delivering best practice support and expertise to member colleges; and
■ providing the English language sector with global visionary leadership.

English Australia is recognised for providing the highest levels of professional development and support for member colleges. English Australia does this through initiatives such as:

■ the development of Guides to Best Practice in key areas of ELICOS operation;
■ a program of classroom-based teacher action research;
■ quality professional publications including the English Australia Journal;
■ an annual Awards Program;
■ an Australia-wide program of workshops and presentations; and
■ the annual English Australia Conference.

English Australia is currently reviewing its comprehensive Guide to Best Practice in ELICOS – Direct Entry Programs. This Guide identifies features that characterise best practice in four key areas in the delivery of programs that provide direct entry from English language to further education:

■ the context for development and delivery;
■ structure, content and methodology;
■ student placement and the monitoring and reporting of student progress and achievement; and
■ resourcing of programs which, on successful completion, enable and equip students to undertake further study at a receiving institution.


ETS TOEFL

At ETS, we advance quality and equity in education for people worldwide by creating assessments based on rigorous research. ETS serves individuals, educational institutions and government agencies by providing customized solutions for teacher certification, English language learning, and elementary, secondary and post-secondary education, as well as conducting education research, analysis and policy studies. Founded as a nonprofit in 1947, ETS develops, administers and scores more than 50 million tests annually - including the TOEFL® and TOEIC® tests, the GRE® tests and The Praxis Series® assessments - in more than 180 countries, at over 9,000 locations worldwide.

www.ets.org
IELTS

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) was developed over twenty-five years ago, in close consultation with Australian universities and British universities. Over the past three decades, the IELTS 9-band scale has remained consistent and has gained currency all over the world as a trusted measure of English language proficiency. IELTS is accepted by over 7000 universities, employers and professional associations around the world.

IELTS is jointly owned by IDP: IELTS Australia alongside British Council and University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL). IDP Education, which today has its headquarters in Melbourne, was founded and is co-owned by the public universities of Australia.

A truly international test, IELTS questions are developed by a team of language specialists based in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and USA and both American and British English are accepted. IELTS also offers a choice of two versions of the test to suit academic and non-academic (General Training) purposes – one of the reasons why IELTS is recognised by more governments for migration purposes than any other English language test.

IDP: IELTS Australia delivers the IELTS test at over 200 locations worldwide and offers face-to-face support to help students apply for their test. In addition, IDP Education’s student placement teams, provide advice and support for international students who want to study in Australia, to help them select the institution and courses that best meet their goals.

For more information visit www.idp.com/ielts

Navitas English

Navitas is an Australian global education leader providing pre-university and university programs, English language courses, migrant education and settlement services, creative media education, student recruitment, professional development and corporate training services to more than 80,000 students across a network of more than 100 colleges and campuses in 23 countries. Navitas is an ASX Top 200 Company.

Navitas English (part of the Navitas education group) has taught English language programs to more than 130,000 migrants and refugees since 1998 through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and settled 18,000 entrants through the Commonwealth Government’s refugee and humanitarian settlement program since 2005.

The company is also one of the largest and most respected of Australia’s quality English language providers offering English language tuition and teacher training to domestic and international students, through ELICOS and TESOL Programs (ETP), comprising of three main operations – Navitas English, the Australian TESOL Training Centre and Hawthorn-Melbourne. With centres in Sydney, Bondi, Manly, Brisbane, Perth and Darwin, Navitas English offers the most comprehensive range of ELICOS programs and the widest range of destinations in Australia.


For more information visit www.idp.com/ielts
Pearson

Pearson is the world’s leading learning company. Our education business combines 150 years of experience in publishing with the latest learning technology and online support. We are also part of the wider Pearson family which includes Penguin, Dorling Kindersley and the Financial Times.

We provide education and assessment services in more than 65 countries. Our courses and resources are available in print, online and through multi-lingual packages, helping people learn whatever, wherever and however they choose. Products such as MyLabs are changing education practice worldwide. At Pearson, we take learning personally. Every day our work helps learning flourish, and wherever learning flourishes, so do people.

PTE Academic is a computer-based English language test that is delivered globally. It measures the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing and demonstrates the English language proficiency of international students. PTE Academic, launched in late 2009 by Pearson, is the most rapidly growing English language test in the world and is recognised by Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship for student visa and accepted by renowned colleges, universities, training providers and professional associations across the English-speaking world. PTE Academic uses state-of-the-art biometric security measures in all test centres, helping us to ensure the identity of the test takers.

For more information, including a full list of recognising institutions, visit www.pearsonpte.com