

Overseas students lag on job-ready English

BY: BERNARD LANE From: [The Australian](#) July 18, 2012 12:00AM

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.

In the study, only two of 40 students beginning their courses with the sector-minimum IELTS score of 6.5 managed to reach the level 7.0 demanded by employers.

And six students went backwards.

This was at odds with the "unwritten assumption" that non-English-speaking students taken in with IELTS 6.5 would improve as they studied and emerge "employable as professionals", academic language researcher Elizabeth Craven said.

She said universities had to do more to help students with language because institutions seemed unwilling to lift English entry standards.

And overseas students hoping for employment, professional registration or a skilled migration visa had to be warned how difficult it was to lift their English to IELTS 7.0 or higher.

"Those who promote study in Australia and other English-speaking countries have a responsibility to raise students' awareness of this fact," she said.

Her research was seized upon by education broker IDP Australia.

"English language proficiency is the area in which there is most scope to better prepare graduates for their careers," IDP says in a submission to the International Education Advisory Council chaired by businessman Michael Chaney.

The company says there is "increasing recognition that international students need English language training in order to graduate as job-ready.

"Many students need to mix more with English speakers or take part in structured English-language tuition programs."

The study was carried out at the University of Technology, Sydney, where Ms Craven used to work, and funded by IELTS Australia, which is owned by IDP.

Chinese were the biggest group in the study, followed by South Koreans.

Most students came from the faculty of nursing, midwifery and health, with the next biggest cohort from business.

The aim was to see how many students could reach an overall IELTS score of 7.0 with at least 7.0 in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Most students believed their English had improved since they began their studies.

Ms Craven conceded the small sample size of the study but said it was "problematic" for universities to accept students with an overall IELTS score of 6.5.

"Many of these students have expectations of employment or permanent residence in Australia on graduation, (but) these expectations are unlikely to be met and the students, therefore, (are) likely to be dissatisfied," she said.

There was an argument that universities should lift the IELTS entry score for courses such as

nursing where professional registration demanded IELTS 7.0, she said.

Alex Barthel, public officer with the Association for Academic Language and Learning, said there were nursing and accounting faculties that did exactly this, albeit unofficially.

"On paper, they will still say 6.5 entry level but among students who apply they will select those who already have 7.0," he said.

"They basically want their students to get jobs."

However, he made the point that less than one-third of overseas students entered university directly with an IELTS score, most of them coming via pathway or foundation programs.

He was not aware of any pathway college that administered a formal test -- such as IELTS, TOEFL or Pearson's test -- at the end of its program.

Instead, Mr Barthel said, colleges typically deemed their students to have attained the level of English needed for the university program into which they were fed.

Mr Barthel said the Craven study showed the need to teach English explicitly in the context of the various disciplines taken by overseas students.