

## INTERNATIONAL BRIEF

### UK higher education funding rises by 6 per cent

Universities in the UK will share £7.14 billion (\$17.8 billion) for teaching, research, vulnerable subjects and special funding in the coming year, the university funding council, HEFCE, announced last week. In addition, institutions will receive £75 million (\$187 million) over the next three years to fund and encourage the study of physics, chemistry and engineering. The £7.14 billion funding allocation is 6.4 per cent more than last year and enough to fund an extra 33,000 places for full-time students, *The Guardian* reports. Almost £1.41 billion (\$3.5 billion) will go to research, an increase of 5.4 per cent on the previous year. Top-rated departments at 23 universities will receive the bulk of the money.

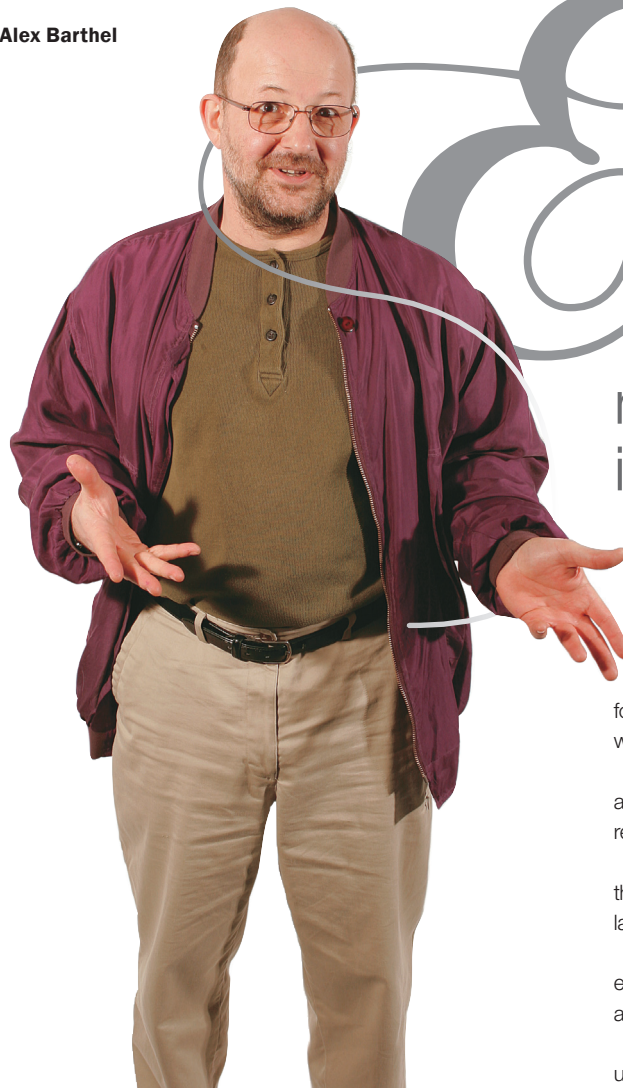
### Backlash over English language programs in Korea

In recent years, there has been a spate of English language programs established at South Korean universities, creating a backlash from Koreans who fear a loss of their culture and professors who worry about a loss of control, *Inside HigherEd* reports. The new programs use English as the language of instruction in a range of fields and universities are introducing English-only zones on campuses. Some have even set up student accommodation villages in which only English is spoken. Korea University, for example, has 30 per cent of its courses taught in English and over 20 per cent of courses at Korea's most prestigious science institute, the Korea Advanced Institute for Science and Technology, are taught in English. Supporters of the programs say they are a way of dealing with globalisation and changing local demographics. But critics says local culture and heritage will be overtaken.

### Gen Ys on a big ego trip

A new report released in the US suggests that Generation Y is suffering from an overdose of self-esteem, the *Los Angeles Times* reports. It says efforts to boost children's self-esteem has backfired and produced a generation of university students suffering extreme narcissism, an inflated sense of self-interest and less ability to create emotional bonds or ties. "I'm concerned we are heading to a society where people are going to treat each other badly, either on the street or in relationships," Associate Professor Jean Twenge, from San Diego State University and lead author of the report, told the paper. Twenge's team surveyed 16,000 college students across the US over a 25-year period. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory asks students to react to statements such as: "If I ruled the world, it would be a better place", "I think I am a special person" and "I like to be the centre of attention". Two-thirds of recent students had narcissism scores above the 1982 score. Thirty per cent more college students showed elevated narcissism in 2006 than in 1982. The report says websites, such as MySpace and YouTube, "permit self-promotion far beyond that allowed by traditional media". The survey also reveals that current first-year students are much more interested in financial success and less in "a meaningful philosophy of life" than students in the 1970s.

Alex Barthel



by Jacqui Elson-Green

**M**assification and opening doors to the lucrative international market have dramatically reshaped Australian university campuses, but just how well have institutions grasped the impact of those changes?

Alex Barthel, director of the ELSSA Centre at the University of Technology, Sydney says that universities have been slow to recognise the need for specific educational strategies to address the vastly different student cohort enrolling today compared with a few decades ago.

And while attention continues to focus on the English skills of international students, Barthel points out that it is not just this group that's in desperate need of language and other kinds of academic support.

Plagiarism is an example of an issue confronting all universities, but he questions what institutions are doing to teach students exactly what it means and how they should reference, paraphrase and summarise, emphasising this is a topic of concern for all students.

"Very often people don't differentiate between the procedural side of things and the educational," he observes.

Universities have an explicit responsibility to help students understand academic conventions of this nature, Barthel maintains, but notes that at the very time this need is becoming acute, support services are actually decreasing in some institutions.

President of the recently formed Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL), Barthel has carried out a qualitative study of academic language and learning support in universities which reveals that institutional support varies enormously across the country and frequently is inadequate.

In some institutions boasting increasing numbers of international students, support services have gone backwards.

Barthel understands that universities are caught in a bind,

struggling to provide services in a climate of declining funding and growing dependence on the volatile international student market.

The new association he heads provides a reference point for staff working broadly in academic language support centres whose work is often "invisible".

Barthel hopes that in forming AALL, this field of professional activity will be further developed by sharing practice, disseminating research findings and collaborating in both teaching and research.

"The main aim is to create a forum for the hundreds, if not thousands, of people working across Australia in the academic language area," he tells *Campus Review*.

Every institution has a support unit of this type, but each varies enormously in what they do, how they operate and the way they are structured.

The ELSSA Centre which Barthel heads at UTS is a centralised unit under the auspices of the office of the deputy vice-chancellor (teaching, learning and equity) that provides academic language and literacy support to students and staff.

The UTS campus clearly reflects the changes that have taken place in the higher education sector, with 36 per cent of its 33,000 students from a non-English speaking background and half born overseas.

Last year the centre provided developmental assistance to more than 3500 students, of whom 61 per cent were internationals, and had more than 11,500 enrolments mainly through programs integrated in faculties.

It's this characteristic – working closely with faculties to embed academic literacy in the curriculum – that marks the work of the ELSSA Centre.

Barthel explains that in 2005, UTS achieved what he believes is an Australian "first" in developing a compulsory subject for all postgraduate coursework students in the information technology faculty.

So successful was that initiative, the faculty called on the ELSSA Centre to replicate the program for all undergraduates.

This has led to a university-wide academic literacy integration program which has an inbuilt mechanism for identifying "at risk" students.

Strategies include:

- Embedding communication, information literacy and staff development within undergraduate and graduate courses and within research processes;
- Systematising and expanding on current processes of embedding;
- Gradually replacing generic courses and one-to-ones by embedded services;
- Providing the means for the more systematic acculturation of faculty lecturers; and,
- Combining the development of teaching and learning with a practice-based approach to certification for lecturers.

Previously the ELSSA Centre ran workshops at which

attendance was voluntary, with the result that those most likely to present were, ironically, often doing quite well or very well. Students doing badly were so overwhelmed for a variety of reasons they skipped the workshops, says Barthel, adding that there are many and complex reasons for this including the sharp increase in students needing to work to support their studies, an increasingly serious issue.

Barthel firmly believes that universities have a responsibility to help students develop skills for their professional life, but first they must learn to navigate the minefield of academic conventions and that's an area where institutions also have a clear obligation.

"The thing that seems to be forgotten is that universities are educational institutions – people come to learn and we don't expect students to be perfect when they arrive. Part of that learning relates to content and how to express it and how to communicate and that is quite specific to each field of study."

Essentially, the first year of university should be an apprenticeship and just as new employees of a company learn to understand its culture, down to writing memos in particular ways, so too should students be immersed in academic traditions.

This has increasingly become important as universities have broadened access, with many students enrolling now who, Barthel says, previously would most likely have opted for TAFE or one of the former colleges of advanced education.

Drop-out rates indicate that without adequate support services, students have great difficulty coping with this strange, new world.

Turning to plagiarism, Barthel says the vast majority falls into the category of being unintentional.

"Students say, and rightly so, that apart from the subject outline that refers to plagiarism, that nobody taught them what it is and how to summarise or paraphrase, and they were unaware they were doing the wrong thing until someone catches them."

While Barthel doesn't differentiate here between internationals and local students, he notes that to some extent there is a difference, not because students are international but because they are from a different cultural background where they are less likely to have been informed or taught these skills than someone who went to school in Australia.

There are also many parts of the world where it is the

## Putting IELTS into perspective

### Would Einstein have met the IELTS requirements to enter an Australian university?

Possibly not, but then again many Australian students would fail or severely struggle if they too had to sit a standard language test and achieve the score demanded of overseas students.

As the debate over standards in schools rages with cross-party support for a national curriculum gathering pace, intriguingly attention continues to focus on the English performance of international students at universities.

But as Alex Barthel who heads the ELSSA Centre at UTS points out, "If the IELTS test was applied to local students, a lot would fail".

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop reinforces that view telling *Campus Review* she has received feedback that universities are finding they have to teach remedial English to Australian students.

Bishop says it is up to universities, as self-accrediting institutions, to ensure they set appropriate standards "at the beginning and throughout the course and not just for international students".

But she says Australia's approach to IELTS scores is consistent with our key competitor countries – the UK, US and Canada.

"Harvard Business School and Oxford set a score of 7, but Texas State, which is highly regarded, accepts 5.5, while the University of British Columbia and McGill both require 6.5," she says.

A survey of IELTS scores conducted by Barthel in 2005, however, reveals some interesting comparisons.

He found that the percentage of Australian universities using a band score similar or higher to UTS (6.5; 6.0 in writing) increased from 31

per cent in 2004 to 37 per cent in 2004 for undergraduates and from 63 per cent in 2001 to 74 per cent in 2004 for postgraduate study.

Between 2001 and 2004 the faculties of engineering at RMIT and the universities of Sydney, NSW and Melbourne, raised their IELTS score to 6.5 (minimum 6.0 in writing).

Barthel speculates that this trend is possibly caused by institutions realising the extra human resource and financial cost resulting from students' poor academic English skills.

In comparison with Australia, of 88 tertiary institutions in Canada listed by IDP Education Australia, 62 per cent have a minimum IELTS band score 6.5 and 23 per cent of 7. Just 15 per cent use the lower entry score of 6, similar to that used by 63 per cent of Australian universities.

At 185 tertiary institutions in the US which offer four-year undergraduate degrees, 27 per cent use a minimum IELTS score of 6.5 and 18 per cent require 7.

Barthel says these figures need to be taken in a broader context where a language test score is not a reliable predictor of poor or good writing practice.

Numerous other factors need to be considered: students' age, general ability, socio-economic, economic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, he maintains.

While not putting great store in IQ tests, he says it's possible for a student to enter a university with an IELTS band score of 8 but that doesn't mean they can cope with the intellectual demands of the course.

respectful thing to refer to acknowledged experts in the field.

It's issues like these that Barthel and his team have tried to address in the compulsory subjects now embedded across many UTS faculties.

Learning to become a good writer and grasping the technicalities of the particular discipline to communicate with other professionals is absolutely vital, according to Barthel.

"Of course learning how to become a good writer is also about learning how to reference and use other people's words in an appropriate way."

The year after ELSSA Centre staff embedded academic literacy into the curriculum in the IT faculty, staff observed far less copying from the internet as second year students came

through knowing that was not an acceptable practice.

But Barthel also emphasises the importance of putting plagiarism in perspective, with less than 100 cases at UTS last year, despite its cohort of 33,000 students doing literally thousands of assignments.

To date, the academic literacy integration project has been highly successful judging by feedback from lecturers, but also students, who understand it is not a subject about languages but one that supports them while developing writing and oral skills for their profession.

"The locals have lapped it up and people with high UAls as well as international students all think it's a great idea," Barthel says.

## Only part of the picture

Raising IELTS minimum scores will not fully address the complexity of the English language proficiency debate, says Dr Sophie Arkoudis.

**R**ecent discussion in the media about the setting of minimum IELTS scores for university entry has overlooked the importance of the social dimensions of English language learning. Let's refocus this debate.

The complex issue of English language proficiency cannot be reduced to a single test score. Universities need to look more closely at developing English language learning services that are more closely aligned with disciplinary learning.

There is no doubt that the English language proficiency of international students is a genuine concern for many academics. However, the focus on IELTS as a gate-keeping device and the debate about the minimum levels of entry is too narrow, with undesirable consequences.

First, students are too often being positioned as being to blame for their lack of English language skills. Second, there are important aspects of English language learning and development that are being overlooked – and which universities need to heed if

they wish to protect the international student market.

There is a mistaken assumption that if students enter with IELTS 7 they will be unlikely to have problems with their studies. Yet meeting an IELTS entry requirements is only a small part of the picture. Whether the minimum IELTS score is 6.5 or 7 is an intellectual debate about required level of entry for university study that misses the point that IELTS scores are limited in predicting the success of students.

Second language learning theory highlights the many factors that influence second language learning, such as motivation, aptitude for learning, age, and length of time learning a language. We do not get this profile with the IELTS test.

The fact is, second language learning is not a neat, linear process. English language learning does not stop at the point of entry to the university, but continues throughout a student's course.

IELTS scores measure the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and the level of proficiency within each of these skill areas can vary

for an individual student. An overall IELTS score of 7 does not necessarily mean that the student received 7 for all the four skills. The more likely result would be that the student is very strong in certain skills and weaker in other, gaining an overall score of 7. Consequently, even though the student receives a score of 7, they would still need to develop their skills for social as well as academic use.

This isn't just about English language proficiency per se. International students must also learn an academic disciplinary discourse. They are entering learning contexts where their academic skills in English play a key role in their academic success. The role of language in disciplinary teaching is crucial in not only expressing the content but in acculturating students to the academic discourse of the discipline.

Disciplines act as distinct academic communities of practice, which guide the curriculum design, assessment and the discourse practices of the discipline. Teaching then becomes a process of making explicit to the

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