

ABC Radio National Lingua Franca 24 Feb 2007

Alex Barthel: are tertiary students competent in English?

Does recently published research by demographer Dr Bob Birrell, from Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research, tell the whole story?

The research has found that one third of international students who received permanent residency here after graduating from an Australian university don't have enough skill in English to be awarded a place in an Australian university, let alone manage a professional job here.

It's a debate easy to sensationalise: are the tertiary institutions turning a blind eye to these students in order to keep their revenue streams running, or are the testing procedures deficient?

Alex Barthel is the inaugural president of a new professional body, the Association for Academic Language and Learning. He's the director of the English Language Study Skills Assistance Centre at the University of Technology, Sydney, which provides academic and professional language support for all UTS students and staff.

Transcript

Alex Barthel: Australian universities have had to adapt, often with great difficulties to two major and closely related changes.

The first of these changes is the type of student enrolling at Australian universities today, in comparison with, say 30 or 40 years ago. A range of federal, state and institutional legislative changes has led universities to implement equity and access as well as multicultural policies. This can be seen as a positive change, in that it has resulted in universities opening their doors to students from a far wider range of educational and socio-economic backgrounds than would have been the case in the more elitist times of the 60s and 70s.

The second major change universities are struggling to adjust to is the undeniable failure by the federal government to adequately plan and fund tertiary education to meet Australia's skills needs. These days, only about a third of university funding comes from the federal government. This has forced universities to look for other sources of income, such as the recruitment of overseas students. They now represent over a quarter of all university students in Australia. Many of these overseas students are unprepared for the rigours of university study and are in desperate need of language support.

Universities have been slow to recognise the impact of these changed demographics have had on their practices. There is an urgent need to set up strong educational strategies to support very needy students.

The funds generated by overseas students are rarely invested in providing this additional support to students. Rather, they are used to supplement the shortfalls in government funding.

Nevertheless, at many Australian universities, structures are in place to develop students' academic and professional literacy, and very good work is being done in this respect: they receive assistance in essay and thesis writing, giving papers, and, understanding academic

conventions. However, with ever shrinking budgets, there is a risk that this work will not be maintained.

I recently completed a quantitative survey of academic language and learning support across Australian universities. This survey shows a vast range of institutional arrangements, structures and, often, inadequate service provision. There is a decrease in the number of academic language and learning staff at many universities where in fact the number of overseas students is increasing. At some institutions the academic status of academic language and learning professionals is being eroded, despite the rhetoric of providing excellence in support to their students.

Very often, simplistic solutions -- based on misconceptions -- are put forward in the hope of solving complex problems. I will explore some of these misconceptions in the form of true or false questions.

First question: ***only overseas students are unprepared for university study. True or false?***

False. Most first year students, irrespective of their educational and language backgrounds, are to a large extent unprepared for university study. This is the message lecturers at the UTS ELSSA Centre, and at other such centres get from frustrated lecturers in faculties. Many students have difficulties grasping the specific purpose and requirements of academic assessment tasks. Frequently, students' written texts lack a coherent argument and are descriptive rather than analytical.

Second question: ***students are allowed to enrol at universities irrespective of their English competence. True or false?***

True and false. Firstly, overseas students can enter Australian universities in several ways. One is by successfully completing a standard language test, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

Approximately two thirds of Australian universities require a minimum IELTS score of 6.0 (out of possible 9.0). A third of universities require a score of 6.5, some higher for postgraduate courses. Students at level 6.0 are described as *competent and have generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies and misunderstandings; [they] can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situation*. At this level, students still need considerable language support.

However, the majority of overseas students enter university via a wide range of pathways, such as a TAFE diploma, or a diploma offered by a private provider or via the HSC (the High School Certificate) or its equivalent in other states. To obtain a student visa, these overseas students can get away with a lower IELTS score than if they entered a university straight from overseas. They only need a score of 5.0 for direct entry courses and can score as low as 4.0 to qualify for a preliminary course. At this level a student is described as a *limited user with basic competence limited to familiar situations; [who] has frequent problems in understanding and expression; [and] is not able to use complex language*.

In fact, once these overseas students have completed their pathway studies, they are then eligible to enrol into a university degree without having to sit for any language test. Some even go straight into the second year of a degree on the basis of the diploma course that they have completed.

We need to be careful about thinking that the IELTS is foolproof. For example, the findings

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of Dr Birrell's report are based on the assumption that an IELTS score is a valid and reliable assessment and, more to the point, a predictor of academic and professional performance. This is a claim the IELTS professionals themselves don't make. Graduates with higher scores are not necessarily of a higher standard in both written and oral communication, say, in a workplace, and vice versa.

Here's an anecdote from my own experience to illustrate this:

Several years ago, an overseas lecturer seconded as a visiting scholar was referred to me by a dean at one of Sydney's universities. This overseas lecturer was a leading world expert in his particular technical field. His pronunciation was so poor that when I met him for the first time I actually thought he was speaking in his mother tongue. However, his written English was excellent, because, in his home country he had been reading and publishing academic and technical English texts for over 20 years. But he had had very few opportunities to actually speak English. This academic would not have passed the English test used to grant permanent residence status in Australia. As he'd been invited to Australia to give a series of lectures, the dean asked me to 'fix' his pronunciation in a few weeks, an impossible task. I suggested that the overseas expert should write his lectures which would then be read by a technical assistant. The expert could answer students' questions after lectures, via email. Over the first semester, our expert also taped the lectures and then I went over them with him. His pronunciation improved so rapidly that, from the second semester he was able to deliver his own lectures in English.

But overseas students are not the only ones who need assistance with university writing and assessments.

What about local students? They are often ignored in discussions about university students' language problems. They are assumed to have reached English language levels enabling them to complete tertiary studies with little or no assistance, even though, increasingly, large numbers have language problems similar to those of overseas students. Many local students come from non-English speaking backgrounds, and/or from disadvantaged educational or socio-economic backgrounds and require developmental as well as remedial language assistance

Local students are not required to complete a university entry language test (and I am not suggesting they should be). However, their English language education often does not prepare them adequately for university studies. In NSW, for example, selection for entry into various university courses is done on the basis of the UAI (University Admission Index). The entry UAI varies from 55 to 99.8, depending on how competitive a degree is. What is not well known is that the UAI score must include a minimum two unit English mark, but it does not specify at what level. So, frequently, local students who achieve high scores in maths, science and technical subjects, but a low score in English, can enter the university with a UAI of 80 or 85 which qualifies them to enrol in a range of engineering, IT, business or nursing degrees.

Another important group of local students are mature age students who need a university qualification for on-going employment. These students frequently lack the confidence to write university assignments because of inexperience and the contrast between their work competencies and the demands of tertiary studies.

My third question is this: ***many students, particularly overseas students, plagiarise. True or false?***

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False. Given that many students entering universities are unprepared for academic study, we often see assignments that fail to analyse and synthesise the literature effectively and are incorrectly or inadequately referenced (that is, plagiarised).

However, this is largely due to the fact that the educational background of many students, both local and overseas, has not prepared them for the variety of written assignments they have to complete. It is quite amazing how few university courses explicitly teach students the conventions of academic writing, such as how to quote, how to paraphrase and summarise, how to acknowledge sources and how to reference -- in brief, how not to plagiarise. Consequently, students don't know what is or isn't acceptable practice. They copy from books, download slabs of texts from the internet, and so on. This is what we call unintentional plagiarism. Once students are taught that this is not acceptable, the vast majority quickly learn how to avoid plagiarism.

But, as in every group there are a few people who simply rot the system, there also are university students who knowingly cheat by plagiarising. These, however, are a small minority. For example, last year, the number of 'academic misconduct' cases reported at Australian universities are in the hundreds, not thousands. These include plagiarism, but also 'cheating in exams'. When these cases are proven, the students are disciplined. Given that on average, universities have 20,000 to 30,000 students, each of whom completes dozens of assignments each year, the problem is not anywhere near the figures reported in the media.

So, my fourth and final question is: ***back to basics is the best way to approach these issues. True or false?***

False. One view is that students should start university with a range of skills, including being able to write academically. This view is based on the idea that literacy is a generic set of skills that students already have and can apply to new situations. Students who can't do this are deemed to have a 'problem' that needs to be 'fixed' by someone outside the faculty (such as the ELSSA Centre).

However, this approach is in direct conflict with the results of research in academic literacy. Best practice in this field has shifted from teaching generic academic skills, such as academic reading, essay writing and grammar, out of context, to integrating language and literacy development into the curriculum of the degrees which students are studying. Because the reading and writing practices that students need to learn are specific to their discipline, these discipline-specific literacies are most effectively learned in conjunction with course content. In an integrated approach, learning how to write in a particular field of study becomes an integral and explicit part of this field of study.

The key feature of this view is that the development of academic literacy should be embedded in the mainstream curriculum of the subjects that the students study. This kind of teaching leads to high quality learning for students and a high degree of equity as it reaches most of them.

For example, at UTS which has a very diverse student population, I estimate that last year, the ELSSA Centre provided such integrated assistance to about a third of all UTS students. In addition, the ELSSA Centre offered numerous supplementary workshops and individual assistance to selected groups of students, such as postgraduate doctoral students. Approximately 5,000 students benefited from these additional services in 2006. While the vast majority of these students were from overseas, the largest single language group was English.

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Unfortunately, quite a few students with language problems don't seek our assistance. This is sometimes due to how little individual lecturers value the importance of good written and oral communication skills in their field, and sadly, they convey this to their students.

Some lecturers argue that certain fields of study and professions, such as IT, engineering, maths or accounting are linguistically less demanding than, say, journalism, medicine or teaching. I find it hard to accept this, simply because one requires advanced language competence in order to express complex abstract concepts in every profession and in every workplace.

I've tried to paint a more nuanced picture of the situation than what is often described in the media, and show that the issues are complex and that universities are committed to addressing many of these issues, albeit with limited resources.

The Australian economy benefits from the rich diversity of students and graduates of our universities. But if adequate support structures aren't maintained, academic standards will decline and we will be guilty of exploiting overseas students.

Further Information

[ELSSA website](#)

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