

THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES: YES, THERE IS A LINK BETWEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS

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Australian universities have struggled to compensate for funding cuts by taking in large numbers of full-fee-paying international students. Concern is mounting about falling standards and the growth of plagiarism. The author interviewed 14 academics from 10 universities and found that all were concerned about the inadequate English of many international students. Most reported pressure to pass such students despite poor work, and to overlook plagiarism. Where academics did report plagiarism they found the process time-consuming and often futile.

INTRODUCTION

The underfunded higher education sector

During the period 1995 to 2003 Australia's public share of total expenditure on tertiary education fell by 16.8 percent.¹ In 2003, other than the United States and Japan, Australia had the lowest share of public expenditure on tertiary education of all the OECD countries reported.² This fall in public spending is part of the government's neo-liberal policies; Australian universities have not resisted these policies and the associated discourses of marketisation and consumerism. Instead they have looked to full fee-paying international students to subsidise the under-funded sector. As a consequence international education has become a multi-billion dollar business enterprise. Paradoxically, the quality of the 'product', an Australian university education based on internationally recognised standards of academic excellence, has been undermined by a rush to recruit students who may not be adequately prepared for a new academic environment in a second language.

Anyanwu and Innes conducted a year-long Australian study beginning in October 2003 which involved focus group sessions with 150 academics, 25 administrative and support staff, 240 undergraduate international students, 136 undergraduate domestic students, 43 postgraduate

international and domestic students. Based on this they concluded that the internationalisation of higher education led the participants in their research to believe that there has been 'a decline in academic standards across the board'.³ In addition to research conducted by academics, concerns about the correlation between the increased reliance on overseas students and declining academic standards feature regularly in the media.⁴ While the data is not conclusive, it is clear that a serious problem is emerging.

English language entry requirements

There are a number of standard tests used to determine the English language competence of international entry-level students to Australian universities, with the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) the most commonly used. Undergraduate entry level is typically a score of 6.00 to 6.5 on the IELTS test, and postgraduate entry-level is usually 6.5 or higher, depending on the discipline area.⁵ This standard has been criticised as being 'barely adequate' for university study by a number of researchers.⁶ In addition to the IELTS, most universities accept alternative pathways into a degree program, which for example, might entail 12 months' study in English or the completion of a diploma at an Australian post-secondary institution. Standards reached via these pathways are

difficult to monitor, particularly in the case of offshore students.

In addition to entry requirements, a significant factor affecting the ability of students with English as an additional language (EAL) to reach their academic potential is the length of time they have been in the new environment. While second language learners master basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) within a relatively short period of time, generally agreed to be about two years, these language skills are not sufficient for students to succeed in academic learning contexts.⁷ Rather, these students need to develop cognitive academic linguistic proficiency (CALP) if they are to succeed in academic second language learning contexts, particularly at the tertiary level. Research over the last 25 years indicates that it takes between five and ten years to develop CALP.⁸

The issue of socio-linguistic competence in a second language has implications for the way that academics assess international students' written and oral work. The minimum English language levels that students are required to meet to enter an Australian university (6 to 6.5 IELTS) are significantly different to the linguistic competence of an educated native speaker, who, for example, could reasonably be expected to achieve 8.5 or 9 IELTS. Given that IELTS educators recommend at least 100 hours of intensive English language instruction to achieve each 0.5 band on the IELTS score, international students accepted on the basis of minimum language requirements will require significant assistance to complete assignments in English successfully. The IELTS Handbook provides an interpretation of the band results that states very clearly that for all academic courses, even those considered less linguistically demanding such as pure mathematics or technology, a score of 6.00 will require

additional English study. Even a score of 6.5 will only be 'probably acceptable' for these less linguistically demanding courses. The only band range where the English language level is considered 'acceptable' for all forms of study is 7.5 to 9.00.⁹

Academic staff have difficulty grading work submitted by some international students, which, while seeming to demonstrate some understanding of the content area, is written in virtually incomprehensible English. This situation becomes even more complicated in the case of postgraduate students who are expected to demonstrate critical and in-depth analysis of conceptually advanced subjects, but who often submit draft after draft of literature reviews that are nothing but cut and paste quotations from texts, with either poor referencing or none at all. Academic staff members find themselves in a dilemma. If they mark the work according to the same academic and linguistic standards expected of local students this may result in fail grades for the significant number of international students who have entered university on the basis of a minimum IELTS or equivalent. However, if they focus solely on the student's perceived understanding of content this would create a separate assessment standard for international students which may threaten academic integrity.

Support for international students

While assistance to international students is offered at most Australian universities via student support centres, funding cuts to the tertiary sector have meant that international students' fees are not necessarily channelled back into these support services.¹⁰ With large numbers of international students and few learning advisers on campus, face-to-face contact is limited. Support tends to be via online learning guides, interactive workshops and websites that assist international students with academ-

ic, learning and language issues. However, online materials (in English) are not the most appropriate form of support for students who may already be struggling in the second language.¹¹ Telling an international EAL student who is having difficulty writing an assignment to go the university website and download a 15-page document on essay writing is clearly not providing meaningful support.

The research overwhelmingly demonstrates that international students require induction into the new academic environment, with specific training provided in Western academic conventions such as essay writing and other Western writing genres, acknowledgement of intellectual property (referencing), academic voice and register, and developing and articulating opinions.¹² In addition, international students may also need specific advice about the student/lecturer relationship, collaborative and individual tasks, and how to negotiate the administrative requirements of their program.

Plagiarism and international students

Taken together—low English language entrance scores, little institutional support or training, and different cultural expectations and learning backgrounds—it is perhaps not surprising that accusations of plagiarism are a frequent occurrence for many EAL international students. A number of researchers claim that many instances of so-called plagiarism in student academic writing is the result of poor academic literacy, particularly in the case of students struggling in a second language.¹³ Raj and Jayathurai, writing from the perspective of being international EAL students themselves, argue that there is ‘a relationship between poor English language and comprehension skills amongst some international students and ... this leads to plagiarism’.¹⁴

METHOD

The findings reported here are based on interviews conducted in 2003–2004, relating to university plagiarism policies. Respondents included fourteen academics from 10 universities representing all Australian states, plus the Australian Capital Territory. The participants included an equal number of men and women, six lecturers, four support staff (three learning advisers and one instructional designer) and four deans. Staff were approached because of their expressed interest in plagiarism issues. All interviews were taped, transcribed and then imported into a central database using the qualitative data analysis software program, NUD*IST (N6).

Although the interviews were specifically seeking information regarding plagiarism policies, respondents spoke openly of related issues including students’ English language competence, the pressure to pass students, and of flawed processes that impinge on the authority of academics to fail students. Throughout this paper, interviewees are referred to by an abbreviated number. For example, Interviewee 1 is referred to as Int01, Interviewee 2 is Int02, and so on.

FINDINGS

English language issues

All 14 respondents stated that international EAL students generally have inadequate English communication skills for study at the tertiary level in Australia. Of the 23 reasons given by interviewees to explain why students plagiarise, six related to English language issues, including:

- poor English and linguistic ability (particularly the inability to manipulate complex, technical language)
- feeling paralysed by the system because of articulation arrangements whereby students receive large amounts of credit for prior learning and

come into the Australian system at second or third year

- inappropriate entry standards set by the university resulting in students not having the necessary skills to succeed
- too much leniency by some lecturers because of EAL issues, and then getting caught by a lecturer with a different attitude in another course
- frustration at not mastering the necessary English skills, even after a considerable time and lots of effort
- some lecturers reward the students for cutting and pasting rather than submitting incomprehensible English.

The following excerpt summarises the key issues raised by both lecturing and support staff regarding the link between low levels of English language competence and plagiarism:

I think they're more likely to be accused of it [plagiarism] because if they haven't got complete command over the English language, and by definition most of them don't, then it's more obvious to spot and I think that's why they're more likely to be and are usually in my experience to be accused of plagiarism ... They might think they are paraphrasing and they are attempting to do [this] but if they haven't got the full command of the language they actually do not recognise they are borrowing paraphrases and whatever ... (Int08)

Pressure to pass students

Seven of the 14 respondents discussed the pressures, either implicit or explicit, from the university regarding soft marking of students, allowing them to pass, or perhaps to plagiarise, particularly in relation to the students' fee-paying status. Int01 spoke openly and honestly about the pressures he felt he was under to pass fee-paying students, regardless of their academic or linguistic ability, or even if they had pla-

giarised large sections of their work. Like many other interviewees he stated that the university had chosen to accept these students on the basis of their fee-paying status, rather than their academic credentials, and had not provided adequate resources and support structures to assist these students in the new learning environment. He therefore did not believe that it was his role to accuse or penalise students for plagiarism.

For this reason, Int01 did not follow his institution's official policy on plagiarism. Instead, he chose an approach that entailed editing the postgraduate students' work and, if necessary, ensuring the thesis would pass by sending it to a sympathetic examiner. In the case of undergraduate students' work, this respondent informally applied the first penalty allowed in the institution's policy (zero for the assignment), but did not officially pursue the matter. He stated that this approach was simply a pragmatic response to an untenable situation:

... there is no doubt about that, that there is pressure on them [academics]. But I'm not the only one that's pragmatic. I've got another colleague down the road here. He also does the same as me. I give them 51 [per cent] and get them out of your hair. I actually think the plagiarism is one aspect of the bigger problem [which] is that the work is just not up to scratch. Just not up to scratch and the university needs to really rethink its institutional framework for dealing with these students. If we are really committed, I guess, to educating them. Not just to the dollar, and I hope that's not true. But we really need to provide them with courses that lift their level of English up so that they actually can write in any field at an academic level comparable with our students. (Int01)

Other respondents who had engaged with their institution's plagiarism policy, such as Int06, also mentioned the resistance within their university to deal with

plagiarism adequately and apply appropriate penalties. Int09 openly stated that he believed universities let plagiarism go because they were covering up for their own deficiencies. According to Int09 senior management knew that the resources were not in place, so they did not penalise the student. This respondent considered this situation to be economically driven, with large classes that are not conducive for EAL students' learning.

The credit arrangements for prior study in the student's home country and alternative pathways into Australian universities also create pressures. Int08 stated that the financial pressure placed on universities 'to put bums on seats' affects standards. He said that many students are allowed to graduate when it is clear that they do not even have the basic skills. Furthermore, this interviewee intimated that the problem is 'swept under the carpet' because programs are expected to be financially viable, and failing large numbers of students will impact on that viability. He believed that international students often win appeals for the same reason.

At Int11's university the revenue pressure was very explicit, with many people, administrators and academics alike, scared to make a fuss about low standards for fear of losing fee-paying students. Int13 suggested that students' fee-paying status puts implied pressure on academics to turn a blind eye to low standards and potential plagiarism. The idea that students might lose their visas also added pressure. Int14 said that the pressure also comes directly from students who tell lecturers that they cannot afford to fail a course and repeat it.

All respondents indicated that the commercial environment of the internationalised university directly impinges on the issue of plagiarism. The following exchange with Int08 sums up the tenor of this discussion:

TB: And you seemed to allude to this a little bit before as well, which is my next question. Do you perceive there to be any differences in the way the institution deals with international students and local students in relation to plagiarism? You were talking about bums on seats and the possibility of soft marking.

Int08: Yeah. Well I believe from what some colleagues tell me that cases are swept under the carpet, in terms of not wanting to embarrass the institution or not wanting to fail the people because there is the compromise for wanting the places, wanting the program to succeed, etc.

TB: Succeed financially?

Int08: Financially, yeah. So I do believe it's a reality in every institution, that there are people that should not be passed that are passed, that are just let go.

TB: When you say people, you are talking about international students?

Int08: International students, yes. Rather than local students. I don't think a local student would be allowed that liberty or that grace ...

Flawed processes which impinge on academics' authority

Although there was no specific question about appeals in the interviews, all staff who had been involved with deliberate plagiarism raised the issue of the flawed appeals process. An audit at Int06's university demonstrated that it was almost exclusively international students who appealed against penalties, and always in relation to examination misconduct. Int09 also stated that he had been directed by senior staff to pass students even when he knew they had cheated but the student had won on appeal.

In all the cases Int10 had been involved in, the international students who appealed either won or had their penalties significantly reduced. In keeping with other respondents' views,

Int10 argued that the appeals committee tends to treat international students quite differently than local students because of issues such as fees and visas. Int11 also agreed that the appeals process is flawed, and that penalties are over-riden. At this interviewee's university, it is the registrar who has the power to reverse decisions made at the faculty level.

The following exchange exemplifies the frustration experienced by those respondents in the sample who had attempted to implement their institution's policy regarding penalties for plagiarism. In this exchange, Int09 details senior management's reluctance to enforce strict penalties. Note: gaps in the text occur where sensitive or identifying information has been removed.

TB: And have you ever had a case where that's happened [students have been suspended or expelled]?

Int09: No. The university is very reluctant even in the worst cases, even in the case of ... from the course let alone kick them out of the university.

TB: ... If it was difficult to fail a student what were you able to do?

Int09: Very little is the short answer. Even when I found a student plagiarising twice on two successive assignments, we had this whole formal hearing [on the first assignment] and [the student] said yes, they would never do it again and then they [plagiarised] the next assignment in the same way. Even in that case I was not allowed to fail the student. In fact they got a lesser penalty the second time around than they had the first.

Discussion

When language is not an issue, international EAL students achieve comparable standards to those of their Australian counterparts.¹⁵ Recent research challenges stereotypes of EAL learners as somehow 'less able' than Australian students.¹⁶ How-

ever, international EAL students are often taught on the basis that they are 'deviations' which need to be remedied. Australian education researcher John Biggs is critical of this approach and asserts that the most appropriate method for teaching international EAL students is to apply '... universal principles of teaching and learning ... across cultures'.¹⁷ While international EAL students should not be singled out as needing remedial help, Biggs emphatically states, 'You can't learn if you are not fluent in the language medium of instruction'.¹⁸ In agreement with Biggs, Australian academics know from experience that it is impossible for students to reach their academic potential if they are not fluent in the language of instruction—in the Australian context, this is English. What is intriguing is that voicing this opinion is considered heretical in the current climate, where the international education industry claims international students contribute \$10 billion annually to the Australian economy¹⁹ and Australian universities are increasingly dependent on the revenue from international fee-paying students.

Saying that international EAL students, who have been accepted into the university on minimum language entry requirements, often cannot write an essay in English to the appropriate standard, is like saying: 'The Emperor has no clothes'. The issue is discussed in the corridor and during faculty meetings. But my research indicates that staff continually express concern that their careers will be jeopardised if they speak openly and publicly about the impact of low levels of English competence on learning outcomes and academic integrity. Prior to the interview for the research, Int11 sent confidential memos and asked me specifically to be very careful with the information, and 'not to let it get out'. There was a level of anxiety in interviews with staff who had had extensive experience of following their institution's plagiarism

policies and who were nervous that any information they provided might be used against their institution or against them personally (Int05, Int06, Int09, Int10, Int11 and Int12). Int09 stated: 'Don't quote me on this', and Int06 requested: 'Please be careful with this information'. During the interview with Int12, I was shown detailed files filled with examples of deliberate plagiarism that this respondent had had to make decisions on. Int12 candidly discussed the process, while prefacing the discussion with: '... Let me show you an example, which I will deny I've shown you' (Int12).

The latest research from the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University²⁰ which demonstrates the low level of English proficiency of international EAL students when they graduate, has provided the opportunity for academics to at last speak about this issue publicly. Perhaps an open and frank debate will enable Education Minister Julie Bishop to understand that a decade of funding cuts to the higher education sector has resulted in universities scrambling for an alternate source of funding in the form of international students, many of whom do not have the English language competence to complete a degree at an Australian university. The excerpt of the findings from my own research on plagiarism policies highlights the fact that, with or without the hard data, academic staff are gravely concerned at the low levels of English demonstrated in assignments written by international EAL students, and that this directly impacts on issues of academic integrity.

Rather than taking a position of moral outrage and demanding harsher penalties for international students who plagiarise, or conversely blaming lecturers for tolerating plagiarism, we should insist that universities set entry prerequisites that reflect the academic and linguistic

standards that must be met if students are to complete a course of study in English successfully. In raising the entry requirements to the appropriate level, universities may suddenly find fewer international students enrolling in Australian programs. This may provide the impetus for the federal government to increase the public share of total expenditure on tertiary education beyond the present miserly 48 per cent to levels more in keeping with other OECD countries (such as the United Kingdom at 70.2 per cent, Germany at 87.1 per cent and Denmark at 96.7 per cent).²¹ At present, with funding shortfalls filled by fee-paying international students, and few universities speaking openly about the decline in standards, there is no incentive for the government to change its policy.

Any debate about the link between English language competence and academic standards needs to include a discussion about the erosion of academic authority and freedom. The data presented in this paper demonstrated that, not only is there pressure on lecturers to pass sub-standard work, but that even when penalties are applied for serious academic misconduct, academics' decisions can be overturned, often without their consent or knowledge. These same academics are then too nervous to publicly confront such intervention, on the understanding that their careers may be at risk.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported on a small sample of the findings from interviews with staff from 10 Australian universities regarding the implementation of plagiarism policies. Qualitative data from the interviews corroborates the demographic research conducted by the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University on the implications of low English standards of international EAL students

at Australian universities. None of my respondents would be surprised that a third of the former international students who had graduated from their universities and obtained a permanent resident visa in Australia in 2005–06 were assessed as having poor English. Academics surveyed for my research spoke openly about the impact of poor linguistic competence on academic standards and, in particular, on the pressure to pass fee-paying students. There can be only one response to this scenario, and that is to raise the English language entry requirements for entry to all Australian universities. This will need to entail not only an increase in the IELTS score so that it

better reflects native-speaker competence, but also the development of tighter controls and monitoring of the various pathways through which international EAL students enter the Australian system without sitting the IELTS test.

*For the full report of the study, please see T. Bretag, 'Implementing plagiarism policy in the internationalised university', Chapter 3 in *Developing internationalism in the internationalised university: a practitioner research project*, unpublished Doctor of Education thesis, University of South Australia, 2005. For a summary of the institutional factors that contribute to plagiarism, see the conference paper of the same title presented at the 2nd Asia-Pacific Conference on Educational Integrity, University of Newcastle, 2–3 December 2005.

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