English language needs and support: International -ESL students' perceptions and expectations

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Abstract

This paper reports the preliminary findings of a survey of international ESL students' perceptions and expectations of English language learning needs and suppor t at the University of Melbourne. The cultural, social and academic challenges that international ESL students face when studying at the tertiary level in Australia are now well documented. Research to date, however, has focused on international students' academic and personal experiences of studying at English -speaki ng universities. The contribution of the present study i s to further document commencing students' expectations and perceptions, specifically in the area of English language learning and suppor t.

In February 2005, 377 international ESL students completed a 50 -item questionnaire about their perceptions of their English language proficiency and the need for further development; and their expectations regarding forms and levels of language support . The data indicate that this group of students have high expectations with respect to academic results, even when they think their current English language skills are not adequate for them to perform well. It is also evident that students expect a far wid er range of support measures for ESL learners than is currently offered at the University of Melbourne.

The findings of the study indicate a significant gap between international ESL students' expectations and current university support services for ES L learners. This will contribute to the difficulties that international students face unless comprehensive measures are developed and implemented to ensure students' expectations of English language support are more accurately aligned with the realities of t ertiary study at the University of Melbourne.

Key Words

Expectations; international students; language learning needs; support services

Introduction

Increasing numbers of international students at the University of Melbourne have seen a corresponding inc rease in the demand for academic support services, particularly in areas of language support. International students made up 20.9% of the total student enrolment in 2004 (Statistics Book, Table 1.09) and the University hopes to increase this figure in comi ng years. These students are at once high users and a target cohort of the services of the Language and Learning Skills Unit (LLSU), accounting for approximately 40% of individual tutorial support. As a consequence, it is important that the Unit has an inf ormed understanding of the expectations and perceptions of this student cohort and, a s far as possible, the Unit is keen to meet students' preferences for particular forms of language support. We are also aware of a need to manage students' expectations ab out the services we can realistically provide, and about the teaching and learning environment they will encounter at the University. As Sherry et al (2004 , p. 2) identify:

> Considering the many expectations that international students have and problems the y face adjusting to a new country and learning environment, it is important for educational institutions to be aware of students needs and expectations, and take steps to identify, measure, meet and exceed those expectations which are under their control.

To improve LLSU service delivery and ensure it aligns as far as possible with students' expectations, we undertook a survey of international ESL (IESL) students' perceptions and expectations of English language learning needs and support at the University of Melbourne. The students who consented t o participate in the survey are not a representative sample of IESL students, but they represent a cohort of students who are likely to

be high users of language support services: in undertaking the Diagnostic English Language Assessment, these students had been identified as likely to benefit from language support, either by their faculty or through self - identification.

The results of this survey will be used throughout 2005 and 2006 planning to inform the devel opment of language services in the LLSU. They will also be distributed to faculties to increase communication about and understanding of IESL students' needs and preferences for support. The difficulties that IESL students face studying in Australia are no w generally acknowledged, and it is understood that discrepancies between expectations and the experience of university study contribute to student dissatisfaction. The findings of this study indicate that there is likely to be a level of dissatisfaction e xperienced by IESL students commencing at the University of Melbourne if current practices are not reviewed or students' expectations are not better informed.

Literature Review

The cultural, social and academic challenges that IESL students face when stud ying at the tertiary level in Australia are now well documented (Ballard & Clanchy 1991; Borland & Pearce 1999; Burns 1991; Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock 1995; Mills 1997; Samuelowicz 1987). They fall into three broad categories: issues related to teaching and learning practices; to coping socially and culturally; and to English language proficiency.

Adjusting to a new educational environment, with practices and values often different from those in which they spent their formative years, poses a significa nt challenge to international students. Samuelowicz's (1987) early study highlighted how approaches to learning affected academic outcome, from both the academics' and the students' perspectives. Over a third of staff surveyed felt that international stude nts did not use appropriate or effective methods of study, in particular that they relied too heavily on rote memorisation. There was also the perception that international students have an "excessive regard for authority" and expect the lecturer to provid e the "correct" answer, resulting in their unwillingness to question during tutorials – a notion contrary to the Australian academic tradition of critical analysis so highly v alued in the learning process. International students were portrayed as "passive recipients," unfamiliar with the interactive style of teaching and learning used in the Western classroom. Incorporating more appropriate and successful strategies for learni ng - critical analysis, classroom participation, independent study – according to Burns (1991, p. 74), means that international students are confronted with an "intellectual revolution" as part of their Australia n educational experience .

Settling in to the new country and lifestyle adds a second dimension to the already "more disloca ting and disadvantageous" (Burns 1991, p. 63) life of the international student. Many will leave their family for the first time and with it, a comprehensive support system that used to cook, clean, pay the bills, encourage, cou nsel, advise and generally d o what all families do: love and cherish. Friends are also left behind, which means that international students have to build a new support network as well as cope with homesickness and culture shock. Financial issues also play a role – immigration regulations insist that many international students demonstrate their capacity to pay up -front the total cost of their tuition and living expenses for the period of their study in Australia. This places a heavy burden on the families and an even heavier one on in ternational students : finding part-time work to lesson the financial worries is as imperative as succeeding at university . Accordi ng to Mulli ns, Quintrell & Hancock (1995 , p. 210), i nternational students rank as serious problems 'obtaining part -time work' and 'fear o f failure' twice as often as local students . This is understandable, given that if an international student fails "[t]he consequent loss of face is not just personal disgrace but extends to the wider family who may have pooled resources to provi de financial support" (Burns 1991, p. 70). Overlay the cultural perception of success as dependent on effort for students from Confucian -heritage background s, as opposed to success attributed to ability in Western cultures (Biggs 199 7), and it is not diffi cult to understand the frustration many international students experience when they receive low or fail marks despite spending more time than their local counterparts on the same tasks.

Language proficiency, or lack thereof, is cited by both academics and students alike as one of the main concerns affecting academic performance (Borland & Pearce 1999; Burns, 1991; Phillip s 1990; Samuelowicz 1987). According to Malcolm and McGregor , this issue creates a high degree of student dissatisfaction when institutio ns accept students based on their English language level only to tell them that their English is not good

enough (as cited in Coley 1999, p. 7). In her research into Australian university English language requirements for NESB students – both local and international – Coley (1999) noted no less than 61 different ways to measure students' English language proficiency for university entrance, from the more respected IELTS and TOEFL to "English Medium of Instruction" to the more ambiguou s "Evidence other than Stated". Considering the disparities in entrance requirements between and within universities, it is not surprising that academic and support staff continue to focus on language standards and the perceived inadequacies of NESB international students' Engli sh.

Students themselves rate English language proficiency as very important for academic success. In Samuelowicz's (1987) study, 52% of international NESB students surveyed rated language problems as "very important" or "important" – a figure mirroring those of academic staff. Si xty per cent of this same student cohort expected difficulties with language *before* they arrived in Australia. A similar study by Burns (1991) showed more than 50% of international students perceived their English language compe tencies as "poor" or "very poor". In particular, international students ranked their writing skills as the lowest of the four macro skills, followed by listening, speaking and reading (p. 66). A later study by Mullins et al (1995) reported that international students were more concerned with understanding expectatio ns, rather than language per se, ranking "making oneself understood, understanding Australian speakers and understanding verbal in structions" in the bottom half of a list of 4 2 items. The students in this study did, however, rank assignment writing and tutorial participation as 7th and 9th most cited problems respectively (p. 213). Borland and Pearce (1999) report that NESB students often take three times as long to read as do native speakers and understand significantly less information delivered in lectures than do native speakers – even after years of study in an Engl ish-speaking institution. With regards to speaking out in tutorials, Briguglio (1998) echoes the sentiments of many international NESB students when she says, "by the time they got around to [thinking of the correct way of expressing the idea] they … missed out on the turn" (p. 48). In addition to developing competencies in spoken conversation, international students in Australia ar e faced with understanding a different dialect : Australian vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, accent and speed of delivery only complicate the communication process (Burns 1991). Most IESL will have learned British or American English prior to arrival; adjusting to Australia n English further compounds language difficulties.

Until fairly recently, these challenges facing IESL students in Australia have been viewed as the problem of the student – a deficit or "blame the student" (Biggs 1997) approach rel ieving the responsibilit y of the educational provider. However, this approach has now been brought into question as a number of academics are challengin g the notion that international students, and in particular those from Confucian -heritage backgrounds, l earn and study in an inferior manner (Biggs 1997 ; Chalmers & Volet 1997; Renshaw & Volet 1995). Traditionally held perceptions that these students learn by rote, are more passive and lack critical thinking skills are being explored in greater depth, an d their veracity reconsidered. As Biggs states, "The resolution of the paradox is simple, if not trite: *When we look at other cultures things are not what they seem* " (1997, p. 7). For example, the role of repetition as an inappropriate learning approach is und er review. Studies are now showing that what many academics negatively attribute to surface learning approaches is really a form of deep learning, in which students do memorise, but contextually so as to give meaning to the learning (Biggs 1997; Chalmers & Volet 1997 ; Kumaravadivelu 2003; Renshaw & Volet 1995). Another example is the misperception that internatio nal students are less active in class (Biggs 1997; Chalmers & Volet 1997; Kumaravadivelu 2003). Rather than a culturally defined inability to enga ge in discussion, it is more likely lack of language and fear of making mistakes that limits participation. Furthermore, silence in class does not necessarily translate to passivity; instead it may reflect culturally different views about the appropriate use of class time. For South -east Asian students, clarifying and rehearsing information is an activity done *outside* of class with friends, not *inside* with the lectur er whose time is valuable (Biggs 1997). In their 1995 study on classroom participation, Ren shaw and Volet further argue that this perceived lack of participation is more likely the result of the "high frequency contributions of a few local students", and that in fact, international students "on average volunteer answers to questions and contribu te their own ideas in a manner that is similar to local students" (1995, p. 93).

An important consequence of these recent studies into international students' learning and experiences is that they effectively turn the focus from students' perceived defi cits to the responsibilities of institutions to provide

inclusive learning environments. International students' satisfactio n with their educational experiences in Australia is becoming an issue of particular concern, and several recent studies have docume nted students' perceptions of the deficits in teaching, learning and support in Australian universities.   In this context, it is not surprising that Mullins, Quintrell and Hancock (1995 , p. 229) note "an uncomfortable level of 'other blaming'" whereby staff and students both experience stress and frustration when their expectations are not met and they do not have the skills or experience to address the problems that consequently arise . Lack of language proficiency, according to Li, Baker and Marshall (2002 , p. 1), is one of the main reasons international students experience a mismatch between expectations and experiences, causing a n "expectation violation" and a negative impact on attitudes about teach ing and learning. The perception of a strong correlatio n between English language proficiency and academic success will have an important effect on both student and staff expectations and, consequently, on international students' experiences.

According to Hellstén (2002, p. 3), there is a general "ill fit" betw een international students' expectations and their experience of study in Australian universities. Two separate studies confirm this view. Adapting customer satisfaction questionnaires to assess discrepancies between students' expectations and perceptions   of university services, East (2001) at La Trobe University in Melbourne and Sherry et al (2004) at UNITEC Institute of Technology in Auckland produce evidence that is of some concern. East (2002 , p. 82) found that students' expectations were not met, parti cularly in relation to teaching and concern for individ ual educational progress . Sherry et al (2004) conclude that "the students in this study are not confident that they are getting value for money, or that the skills they are being taught will get them g ood results both academically and for future employment" (p. 9). They also note a significant difference between the expectations of international students as compared to local students; the former having "greater concerns" with the level of support actual ly provided. According to the authors , this may be attributed to the higher fees international students pay: pay more, expect more (Sherry et al , 2004, p. 9).

It is in this context that the prese nt study has been undertaken to further document commencing IESL students' expectations and perceptions of language learning needs and support. It is clearly important to understand students' expectations of study in Australia, and to attempt to address significant discrepancies between those expectations and the 'realities ' of learning, teaching and support in Australian universities. The principal aim of the study was to collect information that would assist the LLSU in its program planning to better meet the needs and expectations of IESL students at the Universi ty of Melbourne. Additionally, we were interested in identifying areas where informati on for students and for academic teaching staff may need to be improved or supplemented to ensure that students' expectations of study and support are 'realistic'.   The pr oject thus investigates the following research questions:

- Do IESL students perceive a need to improve their English language skills in order to succeed academically?
- What forms of language support do IESL students expect to find and use at the University   of Melbourne?

Research m ethods :

In February 2005, a questionnaire was completed by 414 IESL students commencing their studies at the University of Melbourne . These students had been identified by their faculties as likely to benefit from English language support or self -identified as needing to improve English skills . The aim of the questionnaire was to gather data on these IESL stu dents' perceptions of their Englis h language proficiency and the need for further development; and their expectations regardi ng language support at the University of Melbourne. A questionnaire was chosen as the most effective data collection tool as it permits a large number of students to be surveyed in a short period of time.

The questionnaire was administered during Orientat ion Week and the first week of semester when the University runs its Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA). Six DELA sessions were conducted in February , and the questionnaire was administered immediately after students had completed the DELA. Befo re distributing the

questionnaire, the researchers carefully explained the purpose of the study as well as the extent of the students' participation. The voluntary nature of the study was emphasised, and those who chose to participate provided informed con sent.

A sample of 377 international ESL students consented to participate in the study. Although 414 students had returned questionnaires, 24 of these were excluded from the study as they identified English as being their first language, and a further 13 questio nnaires were excluded as the respondents had not signed the c onsent form. Of the 377 respondents in the study, 67% had studied for more than 12 months in an instit ution where English was the main language of instruction, and 30% had completed an En glish for Academic Purpose s (EAP) course. There were 34 different languages identified as being the respondents' first languages, with the largest cohort (58%) indicating Chinese (Cantonese or Mandarin). The next largest language group was Malay with 8% an d Japanese and Indonesian with approximately 5%.

The sample in this study represented a broad range of the IESL students who form the target cohort for the services of the LLSU. The purpose of the DELA is to assess the students' English language proficien cy and identify their strengths and weaknesses . The results are then used as a basis for making recommendations to students about the forms and level of language development they should undertake to improve their language and communication skills: ESL cred it subjects, workshops, short courses and/or individual tutorials. Althou gh the DELA is voluntary and available to all ESL students, it is targeted to students who have been identified by their faculties as having a low level of English language proficienc y and therefore are most likely to benefit from additional langua ge support. This includes students with an overall IELTS score of 7.0 or less, a VCE English-ESL score under 35 or a Foundation Studies English or EAP score under 85. Students also volunteer to sit the test because they perceive a need to improve their English language skills in order to succeed in their studies at the University of Melbourne. Whether faculty- or self-referred, we can assume that the cohort of students that sits DELA is likely to become significant users of LLSU services.

The questionnaire consisted of 50 question items (see Appendix 1) . Of these, 37 were structured single -indicator items (yes/no), 9 were structured multi -indicator items requiri ng the respondent to choose an optio n from a 3 or 5 point scale (see questions 16 -24), and 4 items were open -ended questions. Care was taken in constructing the questionnaire to cater for the varying levels of English language competence, and to avoid potential ethnic or racial bias (Wa rnecke et al 1997). After the initial drafting of the questionnaire, some modifications were made to the layout, wording, and ordering of question items in discussion with a research consultant. In addition, the questionnaire was pre -tested on several IESL students at the University to both ide ntify any problems in interpretation and also estimate the time it would take for students to complete the form. The feedback from the students who participated in the trial suggested that the question items were clea r and unambiguous, and that 15 minutes would be sufficient to complete the questionnaire (the students in the trial took less than 12 minutes to complete the questionnaire).

Once the completed questionnaires were returned, data were coded and collated usi ng SPSS. From this, tables and graphs were generated and obvious correlations were examined. Initially, the researche rs had planned to investigate correlations between students' perceptions/expectations and their first language background or ethnicity; however, this was not possible as the numbers of students sharing a similar first -language or ethnic background (other than Chinese), was not large enough to carry out a valid or meaningful correlation test.

Ethics approval for the project was sought from an d granted by the Arts and Education Human Ethics Subcommitte e at the University of Melbourne.

Results

The data have been preliminarily analysed in relation to the research questions above.

Perceived importance of improving English language skills and language learning needs
Ninety-six per cent of respondents indicated that the opportunity to develop English language skills was Very important (76%) or Somewhat important (19%) in their decision to study in Australia. Interestingly, the

opportunity to impro ve conversational English (Very importa nt = 78%) was only slightly less i mportant to students than improving academic English (Very importa nt = 83%).

In addition to generally being motivated to improve English proficiency, the majority of students in this survey viewed English language skills as important for doing well in their academic studies. Specifically, 99% of respondents thought that these skills were Very important (70%) or Somewhat important (29%) to achieve marks within the top one -third of the class in their particular course. Similarly, 83% thought that correct grammar and good written expression were necessary to get high marks on written assignments.

This particular cohort had high academic expectations: 70% expected their results to be in t he top one -third of their class. In addition, 71% indicated they would not be happy with a mark below 70% for an assignment; 96% would not be happy with a mark b elo w 60%. Students held these expectations of achieving high academic results despite the fact that 60% of respondents said they were concerned that they would be at a di sadvantage bec ause English was their second language.

Given the high value placed on English language proficiency and their high academic expectations, it is not surprising that 79 % of respondents thought their English proficiency would be adequate for the m to pass but only 32% thought it would be adequate for them to perform well, as defined above. In support of this perception, 71% of respondents rated their English language profi ciency as Low or Intermediate (the lowest 2 categories on a 5-point scale); only 4% of students rated their skills as Very High or Native Proficiency (the highest 2 categories on a 5 -point scale). As a consequence, 87% expected that they would need to spen d time improving their English skills in order to get marks with which they would be happy.

Interestingly, asked how much time they planned to spend outside classes further developing their English language skills, only 28 % of students surveyed indicated that they would spend 5 or more hours per week; 39% planned to spend 2 hours or less per week.

The following table indicates which of the four key language skill s the students thought was the most important for getting high marks in their course, and whic h skill they thought they needed to improve the most this year.

Table 1: Perceived needs regarding English language key skills

	Which English language skill is most important for high marks?	Which English language skill do you need to improve most this y ear?
Writing	55.6%	38.7%
Reading	15.2%	7.5%
Speaking	14.4%	34.1%
Listening	14.9%	19.7%

Students in this survey also appeared responsive to the identification of language learni ng needs by academic staff: 92% thought it was reasonable for a lecturer t o direct ESL students to attend additional language classes or courses if they had been identified as needing to improve their English language skills. More importantly, 93% of respondents indicated they would attend such classes if directed to do so by th eir lecturer.

Expectations of support
The IESL students who responded to this survey have high expectations of institutional support. Ninety -four per cent indicated that, having offered the student a place, the University should ensure they get all the su pport needed to pass their subjects. Academic staff are readily identi fied as the source of that support with 96% of respondents indicating they expect the subject teacher to help them with any difficulty.

In addition, respondents expected certain accommo dations to be made: 65% expected ESL students to get extra time for assessment tasks, and 63% expected reading material, assessment tasks and lectures to be selected or

designed to meet the needs of ESL students. Only 44%, however, expected lecturers to ig nore errors in grammar and written expression in assignments.

In relation to language support services, students expected the following types of support to be available at the University of Melbourne. In all but one category, fewer students indicated that they would be likely to actually use these services.

Table 2: Forms of language support that students expected and we re most likely to use

Type of support:	Expect	Likely to use
Short courses (4 -6 weeks) on topics such as reading, writing, pronunciation	90	77
An editing and proofreading service for correction of written assignments	90	89
Regular meetings with lecturers to discuss subject content and assignments	89	88
Regular tutorials for ESL students taught by subject specialists	89	80
Informal dis cussions with native English speakers	84	75
Provision of lists of technical words and definitions for each subject	84	82
One -to-one tutorials	80	79
Advice from other international students	77	67
Intensive language courses during semester breaks	72	63
Small group lunchtime workshops	69	58
Tapes of all lectures and seminars	65	66

On the questionnaire, students were able to nominate additional forms of language support that they expected to be available or were likely to use. Most students left these q uestio ns blank or wrote "Nil". Several students indicated that they expected online or CD -based interactive resources, including online dictionaries and self -learning exercises. One student expected " specific English courses for my field – Law".

Discussio n

Students' perceptions of the importance of language learning and their language development needs
The preliminary data from this survey indicate that this cohort of students rated English language development as very important. Almost all students indica ted that the opportunity to develop English skills was a significant factor in their decision to study in Australia. Improving conversational English skills was almost as important to students as improving their academic English skills.

They also identifi ed English language skills as very important for achieving high marks in their courses. This perception is likely to have been a significant factor motivating these stude nts to sit the DELA, as the data indicate that they have high expectations with respec t to their academic results. The majority of students in the survey expected to be in the top one -third of their class, even though a majority also thought they would be at a disadvantage studying in English as a second langua ge. They believed that their c urrent English language skills would not be adequate for them to perform well. As a consequence, a substantial majority of students in this cohort expected to spend time improving their English skills in order to get the kinds of academic results they were expecting. This finding – that these students expected to undertake additional English language development over the year – confirmed our expectation that this cohort was likely to comprise potential users of the University's academic and language support services.

The students' expectations about the amount of time they would invest in order to improve their language skills do not, however, match our expectations of what would be required to achieve a significant improveme nt in language proficiency. Les s than one -third of the respondents planned to spend 5 hours or more per week outside class time developing their English; almost half indicated that they pla nned to spend 2 hours or less per week developing their English. In our view, this estimation of t he time allocated for language development work,

while it might be a realistic estimate of what the student would do , is unrealistic in relation to the objective of significantly improving English language proficiency. In short, in our analysis, a signific ant number of these students were unrealistic not only about the time and effort required to develop language competencies, but also about the priority needed to be allocated to developing the level of English proficiency that they themselves believed nece ssary to achieve high academic results. This discrepancy between the importance attributed to English language skills and their plans for language development is likely to lead to frustration and disappointment of these students' academic aspirations.

There is evidently an important role here for the LLSU in managing students' expectatio ns about the study time required for significant language development. In particular, we need to dispel the misperception that language skills will improve significantly so lely as a result of participating in English -based classes. We may also need to counsel students with lower levels of proficiency regarding the necessity of developing a self -study plan and taking a consistent and applied approach to English language study involving formal credit and non -credit courses. Almost all students indicated that if their lecturer directed them to undertake additional language classes or courses they would comply, so it may be effective to encourage academic staff to be involved to a greater degree in the identification and referral of students likely to benefit from language development programs.

Students' identification of the language skill that they needed to improve most this year differed in a significant number of instances from their identification of the language skill that is most important for achieving high marks in their course. Writing is accepted as the most important language skill for academic performance, which is not surprising in that much of tertiary assessmen t is based on written assignments. Interestingly, a number of students are more confident in this area than they are in relation to speaking. T he high concern to improve speaking (34%) and listening (20%) skills probably reflects the timing of this study: the majority of students surveyed had recently arrived in the country and may not yet have been accustomed to hearing the Australian dialect or communicating in English.

The implication from this finding, however, is that students could benefit from inc reased support for speaking, listening and conversation skills in orientation week and the first weeks of semester. The focus of LLSU services at present is appropriately on academic writing, but if students' perceptions o f their needs are to be met, there is room to increase support for speaking and listening, which could be offered both pre -departure and on -arrival. We would also note that students' rating of reading skills does not conform with the importance we would assign to it for a number of the cou rses at the University of Melbourne. Borla nd and Pearce (1999) remark that "even though reading of written text is, in a sense, the basis of tertiary study," it is an "invisible" activity: teaching staff are not faced with "evidence" of students' reading s kills – or lack thereof – as they are with students' writing skills (pp. 60 -61). Given the high priority attributed to critical thinking in Australian universities , students' ranking of the importance of reading skills may be inaccurate.

Students' expecta tions of support at the University of Melbourne
The findings of this study indicate that this group of international students, who are characterized by high academic expectations coupled with concerns about their levels of language proficiency, have high e xpectations regarding the level and forms of support that the University will provide. In short, these expectations would be considered unrealistic in the Australian higher education conte xt; certainly, they are unlikely to be met by current servic es available at the University of Melbourne .

Most notable in this respect is the finding that almost all respondents believed that the University should ensure they received all the support they needed to pass their subjects. Clearly, differences in academic cult ures are informing this expectation; it is not a simple matter of these students being unrealistic or failing to take responsibility fo r their own academic progress. According to Hellstén (2002 , p. 7), international student s have a clear expectation that t hey would be "taken care of" by their host culture a nd their university. This expectation is amplified by the "high stakes" involved: the decision to study overseas is a huge investment toward achieving personal and professional values. "For [these interna tional students], the stakes are knowingly high and exceptionally high stakes bring high expectations" (Hellstén 2002, p. 11). Nonetheless, the expectation tha t they will be supported to pass all their subjects is evidently inconsistent with Australian hig her education norms and,

more specifically, with practices at the University of Melbourne. Here, it is generally accepted that enrolme nt into a particular degree program is not a guarantee that students will successfully complete that qualification. Indeed, it is expected that a number of students will fail assessments, subjects and coursework requirements. Full-fee paying students are certainly given no special consideration in this regard.

If IESL students' expectations of an Australian education are to be met, even in part, it seems imperative that services such as the LLSU work to improve pre -departure and on -arrival information and orientation of both undergraduate and postgraduate international students. In particular, we need to improve students' und erstanding of Australian academic culture and the emphasis given to independent learning and individual responsibility. The rights, roles and responsibilities of academic staff, support services, and students also need to be discussed at greater length. In this respect, we feel it is important to go beyond mere information about services and forms of support for international students; some explanation and discussion needs to be provided about the assumptions and expectations that underpin the models of tea ching and learning at this institution. Equally important, the University needs to do considerably more to educate its teaching staff about the range of cultures represented in its student cohort, the implications that cultural encoding has on teaching and learning and in particular, inclusive teaching practices. It will thus be important for the LLSU to communicate the findings of this survey of students' expectations regarding support to the faculties so that such expectations are also explored, challenge d and managed at the departmental and subject level.

The same recommendations apply similarly to students' expectations regar ding what may be thought of as special accommodation measures: that ESL students would be given extra time on assessment tasks (6 5%); and that reading material, assessmen t tasks and lectures would be selected or designed to meet the needs of ESL students (63%). The first expectatio n will not be met at the University of Melbour ne as the Academic Board has ruled that it would be inequ itable for categories of students to be given automatic access to additional ti me on exams. The second expectation of tailored materials, lectures and assessments would be met if at all, only partially and inconsistently. LLSU can play a role in exte nding communicatio n with stude nts, pre-departure and on-arrival, about the conditions they will experie nce at Melbourne and the forms of support they can e xpect. We will also discuss with faculties ho w they might better understand and manage s uch expectatio ns.

Interestingly, the one accommodation that most students did not expect is the one most likely to be observed. In our experience, many lecturers do ignore errors in grammar and written expression when assessing ESL student's written assignments, yet the stu dents themselves do not expect this to happen. Indeed, students' perceive correct grammar and good written expression as necessary to achieve high marks. While this is sometimes the case, detailed discussion of the assessment criteria for assessment tasks is needed to alert students to the other, more important factors that determine academic results. Especially as we suspect that students often incorrectly attribute poorer than expected academic performance to language difficulties, more detailed informati on needs to be provided about the critical thinking, research and analytical skills that students at Melbourne are expected to demonstrate.

In relation to language support services more particularly, the survey results indicate that students' expectations in this area are also unlikely to be met by the 'reality' at the University of Melbourne. At present, the only services that substantially meet students' expectations are the short course and individual tutorial programs. In relation to expectations that are unlikely to be met, firstly, it is evident from the findings that these students expect to find language support services and programs integrated or embedded within departments, courses and subjects. For example they expect subject specialists to offer regular tutorials for ESL students, to provide lists of technical works and definitions , and to meet with students regularly to discuss subject content and assignments. The LLSU at Melbourne is predominantly a central administrative unit, however, and the re is sometimes a misperception that its programs are entirely generic (non -discipline specific). It is important that both students and academic staff understand that, although centrally located and administered, the LLSU is able to provide services that will meet discipline -specific needs. LLSU staff are also able to develop and deliver integrated programs in collaboration with academic staff and, as they will meet students' expectations more closely, a greater emphasis on faculty -based programs and locat ing LLSU advisers in faculties (a recent LLSU initiative) are strongly indicated.

We are already aware that IESL students are often disappointed that studying in Australia does not provide the expected opportunities to socialize with local students and im prove conversation skills through informal discussions (Dunsta n & Drew 2001; Smart et al 1998; Volet & Ang 1998). At the University of Melbourne it is not the LLSU's brief to accommodate this activity as our focus is on academic skills support rather tha n international student support. We can, however, see a need to prepare more information about existing programs and opportunities to mix with local English speakers, and to increase our referral to the various clubs and networks available through Internatio nal Students Services, Student Programs and the undergraduate and postgraduate Student Unions.

Fewer than 60% of the respondents indicated that they would be likely to attend small group lunchtime workshops. This finding is of some concern as the lunchtim e workshop program currently forms a significa nt part of LLSU offerings for ESL students. It will be important for us to consider whether the time and resources currently committed to this program can be reallocated to better meet students' expectations; s hort courses and faculty-based programs are evidently preferred. Alternatively, we need to persuade students of the value of this program based on previous participants' evaluations.

Finally, the LLSU clearly has a task ahead to explain to IESL students w hy their expectations of editing and proofreading services will not be met at the University of Melbourne. This is an ongoing challenge for our service and we are aware that policy on this point at the University of Melbourne is not consistent with practic es and services at other Australian universities. The University of Melbourne, and the LLSU in particular, has adopted a policy that students' written work must be their own and, as a con seque nce, the systematic correction of errors in another person's wor k is not permitted. Equity concerns also inform this position: in many instances it would be difficult to justify offering an editing and proofreading service to ESL or international students and not to local English -speaking students whose writing could a lso benefit from professional 'correction'. Resources would never be available or adequate to fund such a service, the pedagogical value of which would also be in question. The objective of the work of the LLSU is thus to improve students' language and aca demic skills, including their ability to identify and self -correct errors in grammar and written expression; it is not our objective to offer a service which may improve a student's grade on an assignment but which has no longer -term educational benefits. Clearly, this needs to be communicated effectively to prospective and current students who may expect quite different forms of support.

The key findings related to students' expectations and LLSU responses are summarised in Appendix 2.

Conclusion

IESL st udents face a range of difficulties and challenges studying in Australian tertiary institutions. Adjusting to a different culture of teaching and learning, settling into a new environment and forming new social networks, and learning to communicate and stu dy in English as a second language are all demanding and time -consuming activities. We know that IESL students have invested heavily in their international education with muc h at stak e and even at risk. If their experience of university educatio n in Australia is to be positive and successful, a range of practices and services must be in place. Recent resear ch indicates that IESL students have high expectations of teaching and learning in Australia which, if not met, will result in poor evaluations of the in stitution and "customer" dissatisfactio n. It is imperative for univers ities who want to maintain and increase current international student enrolments to recognise and meet, as far as possible, the educational expectations and needs of this student cohort for an inclusive learning environment.

As a limited contribution to this project, the present study was undertaken in order to better understand IESL students' perceptions of English language learning needs and expectations of language support at the Uni versity of Melbourne. From the preliminary findi ngs of our survey, it is evident that students expect a far wider range of support measures for IESL learners than is currently offered at the University. The findings also indicate a significant gap between IESL students' expectations and current university approaches to accommodating ESL learners.

The findings of this study have implications for program planning at both the LLSU and faculty levels. As well as working where possible to better align services with students' preferences, there is an evident need to better manage and inform student expectations. This can be done through improvement of pre-departure information as well as on-arrival orientation. It will also be important to communicate to academic staff students' expectations that their lecturers will be the primary source of learning support, and that language services will be integrated at the subject level. Without increased communication around students' expectations, the gaps between their expectations and the realities of university study will contribute to the difficulties that international students face. In particular, comprehensive measures need to be developed and implemented to ensure closer alignment between the realities of tertiary study at the University of Melbourne and IESL students' expectations of English language support.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

English language learning
students' expectations and perceptions

Please answer yes or no to each of the following questions.	yes	no
Have you studied for 12 months or more in a secondary or tertiary institution in which English was the ma in language of instruction?....................................	5	5
Have you completed an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) cou rse?....	5	5
Do you think your current English language skills will be adequate for you AT LEAST TO PASS all your subjects this y ear?..	5	5
Do you think your current English language skills will be adequate for you to PERFORM WELL in all your subjects this year ?........	5	5
Do you expect that you will nee d to spend time improving your English language skills in order to get marks that you would be happy with this year?	5	5
Do you expect your lecturers to give you extra time for assessment tasks and exams because English is not your first language?.........	5	5
When marking ESL students' written assignments , do you expect lecturers to ignore errors in grammar and written expression?..........	5	5
Do you expect reading material, assessment tasks and lectures in yo ur subjects to be selected or designed to meet the needs of ESL students?.......	5	5
Do you think it is reasonable for a lecturer to direct ESL students to attend additional language classes or courses if they have been identified as needing to improve their English language skills?..	5	5
If you were directed by your lecturer to attend additional classes or courses to improve your English language skills , would you attend them?	5	5
Do you expect your results to be in the top one-third of your class?................	5	5
Having offered you a place, should the University ensure that you get all the support you may need to pass your subjects?...........	5	5
Are you concerned that yo u will be at a disadvantage studying here because English is your second language?..............................	5	5
Do you think that correct grammar and good written expressio n are necessary to get high marks on written assignments?....................................	5	5
Do you expect your subject teacher to help you if you have difficulty with any aspect of your c ourse?..	5	5

please turn the page…

Please answer each of the following questions.

How do you rate your current English language skills?

5 Low	5 Inter-mediate	5 High	5 Very high	5 Native proficiency

How MANY HOURS PER WEEK do you plan to spend outside your classes further developing your English language skills this year (other than by social conversation)?

5 None	5 1–2	5 3–4	5 5–6	5 7+

Which ONE of the four key English language skills do you think is most important for getting high marks in your course? (select only one)

5 Writing	5 Reading	5 Speaking	5 Listening

Which ONE of the four key English language skills do you think you need to improve most this year? (select only one)

5 Writing	5 Reading	5 Speaking	5 Listening

What is the lowest percentage mark that you would be happy with for an assignment?

5 50 – 59	5 60 – 69	5 70 –79	5 80 – 100

How important was the opportunity to develop English skills in your decision to study in Australia?

5 Not very important	5 Somewhat important	5 Very important

How important is it for you to improve your CONVERSATIONAL English in 2005?

5 Not very important	5 Somewhat important	5 Very important

How important is it for you to improve your ACADEMIC English in 2005?

5 Not very important	5 Somewhat important	5 Very important

For your course, do you think English language proficiency will be important for getting marks in the top one-third of your class?

5 Not very important	5 Somewhat important	5 Very important

please turn the page…

Do you EXPECT these forms of English language support to be available at this University?	yes	no
Short courses (4 -6 weeks), on topics such as reading, writing, pronunciation .	5	5
Small group lunchtime workshops …………………………………………	5	5
One-to-one tutorials ………………………………………………………	5	5
Informal discussions with native English speakers ……………………………	5	5
Advice from other international students ……………………………………	5	5
Intensive language courses during semester breaks ……………………………	5	5
Regular tutorials for ESL students taught by subject specialists ………………	5	5
Regular meetings with lecturers to discuss subject content and assignments .	5	5
Provision of lists of technical words and definitions for each subject …………	5	5
An editing and proofreading service for correction of written assignments …...	5	5
Tapes of all lectures and seminars …………………………………………..	5	5

What other forms of language support do you expect to be available at the University?	

Are YOU LIKELY TO USE these forms of English language support?	yes	no
Short courses (4 -6 weeks), on topics such as reading, writing, pronunciation .	5	5
Small group lunchtime workshops …………………………………………	5	5
One-to-one tutorials ………………………………………………………	5	5
Informal discussions with native English speakers …………………………	5	5
Advice from other international students ……………………………………	5	5
Int ensive language courses during semester breaks …………………………	5	5
Regular tutorials for ESL students taught by subject specialists ………………	5	5
Regular meetings with lecturers to discuss subject content and assignments .	5	5
Provision of lists of technical words and definiti ons for each subject …………	5	5
An editing and proofreading service for correction of written assignments …...	5	5
Tapes of all lectures and seminars …………………………………………..	5	5

Are there any other forms of language support that you would be likely to use?	

What is your first language?	

What is your nationality?	

Thank you for participating in this survey. The results will help us to improve our services for international ESL students and we sincerely appreciate your contribution.

Appendix 2: Summary of key findings regarding students' expectations and LLSU responses

Expectation #1
Finding: Although most students rated their language proficiency as low o r intermediate, students planned to spend less time outside classes further developing their English than we would predict they might need .
Response: - Improve information available to students about the time and effort required to improve language proficie ncy and the need for them to accommodate this priorit y within their course -load   - Prepare outlines of sample self -study plans   - Encourage academic staff to identify and refer students who are likely to benefit from language development programs
Expectation #2
Finding: A significant number of students thought that they most needed to improve speaking and, to a lesser degree, listening skills this year even when they identified writing skills as most important for academic success.
Response: - Increase support f or speaking, listening and conversation skills in orientation week and the first weeks of semester   - Consider ways to support development of speaking and listening skills pre -departure   - Advise students that reading skills may be more important in certain cour ses than they expect
Expectation #3
Finding: Students thought the University should ensure that they received all the support they needed to pass their subjects.
Response: - Improve pre -departure and on -arrival information for undergraduate and postgradua te students. In particular: - Explain the emphasis placed on independent learning and individual responsibility in Australia n academic culture   - Outline the rights, roles and responsibilities of academic teaching staff , support services and students at the Uni versity of Melbourne   - Discuss what might be considered 'realistic' expectations regarding academic success
Expectation #4
Finding: A majority of the students expected certain accommodation measures including: that ESL students would be given extra time on assessment tasks; and that reading material, assessment tasks and lectures would be selected or designed to meet the needs of ESL stude nts. Fewer students expected lecturers to ignore errors in grammar and written expression in assignments.
Response: - Inc rease communication with international ESL students pre -departure and on -arrival around these issues   - Distribute to Faculties the findings of this survey and discuss the need to manage such expectations at the departmental and subject level   - Increase informa tion for international ESL students about assessment criteria for assignments
Expectation #5
Finding: In relation to English language support, a substantial majority of students expect to find and would be likely to use an individual tutorial service and short courses (4 -6 weeks) on topics such as reading, writing and pronunciation.
Response: Expectations will be met in this regard; students' preferences for these forms of support should be considered in future planning within LLSU
Expectation #6
Findi ng: The majority of participants expected language support services and programs to be integrated or

embedded within departments and subjects.
Response:
• Explore strategies to raise awareness with students and academic staff of the LLSU's discipline speci fic programs
• Increase collaboration with Faculties to develop and deliver integrated programs
• Seek opportunities to expand the 'advisers in Faculties' initiative.
Expectation #7
Finding: A significant majority of students expected informal discussions wi th native English speakers to be provided as a form of language support.
Response:
• Prepare an information leaflet about programs and opportunities available through International Student Services, Student Programs and the Student Unions for international ESL students to mix with local students
Expectation #8
Finding: Small group lunchtime workshops were not identified as a popular form of language support .
Response:
• Review the lunchtime workshop program and consider whether resources should be realloc ated to short courses and Faculty -based programs
• Collate data on the effectiveness of lunchtime workshops as learning opportunities
Expectation #9
Finding: Most students indicated that they expected and would be likely to use an editing and proofreading service for correction of written assignments.
Response:
• Explore ways to communicate to prospective and current students LLSU policy regarding editi ng and correction of written work and the value of a skills development approach in language services
• Ensure Faculty staff are aware of the policies and practices of the LLSU