

English at a Higher Degree

Postgraduates' perception of their English proficiency and how they seek assistance

Overview

- * Three current hot topics in the academic world
- * Three domains of English
- * The postgraduate perspective
- * A survey of Monash postgraduates:
 - Perception of their English skills
 - Experience with current support services
 - The postgraduate wish list

- * Recommendations and ideas how to improve English support for postgraduates



Reasons for the survey

Three current hot topics in the academic world which had a daily impact on our work with international postgraduates:

- * English proficiency levels
- * Graduate employability
- * International students' experience



English proficiency levels

- * Discussion prior to 2009 resulted in the

Good Practice Principles for English Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities (DEEWR, 2009)

- * Current topics:

- Implementation of the *Good Practice Principles*
- Entry levels and pathways
- Post entry language assessments (PELA)
- Employability



Graduate employability

Three most important selection criteria when recruiting graduates, 2009-12
(Graduate Careers Australia: *Graduate Outlook 2012*)

Selection Criteria	2009	2010	2011	2012
Interpersonal and communication skills (written and oral)	1	1	1	1
Passion/Knowledge of industry/Drive/ Commitment/Attitude	2	2	2	2
Critical reasoning and analytical skills/ Problem solving/Lateral thinking/ Technical skills	3	3	3	3

Graduate employability



- * How exactly do we measure teach and assess interpersonal and communication skills?
- * Are they culture specific?
- * Do different professions require different sets of skills?
- * Can they be integrated into Higher Education curricula?
- * What are the implication for international students who are planning to work in Australia after graduation?

The International student experience



Overall experience for postgraduates is positive, however, three factors need improvement:



- * Not enough interaction with locals.
- * Students request more opportunities for professional experience in their academic field.
- * More opportunities and better support to improve their English.

Three domains of English

- * **Academic English** – study related assistance is available, mostly for writing
- * **Conversational English** – for everyday use, interaction inside and outside the university

Recent studies have shown that this is where students struggle, it causes a lot of frustration and anxiety, no systematic assistance available.

- * **English for professional use**



The postgraduate perspective



- * **Research (HDR) students:**

High achievers in their own country, often experience substantial “loss of face” and prestige during their time in Australia, feeling of isolation.

- * **Postgraduate coursework students:**

Majority in professional oriented MA degrees, very high study load in a short time, language, content and academic convention often differ from their undergraduate degrees.

The postgraduate perspective

- * Postgraduate English entry requirement: IELTS 6 – 6.5 or equivalent.
- * According to the IELTS handbook a score of 7.0 is deemed as “probably acceptable” for **linguistically demanding courses**, only **scores from 7.5-9.0** are considered as clearly acceptable.
- * “It is generally accepted that students will take between 10 to 12 weeks to move 0.5 on the IELTS band scale if they study **full time** intensive English.”



(Sue Blandell, English Australia Panel, at the Australian International Education Conference 2007)

The survey



- * Survey designed and conducted by Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA)*
 - * It was online for a period of 8 weeks
 - * August – October 2012
 - * It was anonymous and accessible to Monash postgraduates on all Australian campuses.
- * MPA granted permission to use the data for presentation at the ISANA conference.

The survey



The survey focus was on:

- * Postgraduates' English language scores on entry of course
- * Areas in which they perceived a need to improve their English
- * Their experience with support for language learning

The survey



- * It examined the **four language skills** of reading, writing speaking and listening
- * and included domains such as **English for academic use, social interaction and employment related communication.**
- * It consisted of tick boxes and open comment sections.
- * **93 postgraduates responded, 48 research students, 45 coursework students.**

Entry scores of repondents

Test taken	Result	Number of students with this score
IELTS	6	4
IELTS	6.5	22
IELTS	7	23
IELTS	7.5	15
IELTS	8.0	8
IELTS	8.5	2
TOEFL iBT	79-93 (= IELTS 6.5)	2
TOEFL iBT	94-101 (= IELTS 7.0)	4
TOEFL iBT	102-109 (= IELTS 7.5)	1
TOEFL iBT	110-114 (=IELTS 8)	3
Other		6



Survey results – writing



From the list below, please tick the areas in which you would like to get help with your English skills

Coursework students

Research students

Study related (discipline specific research or assignments),

33

33

CV, job application letters and workplace/placement specific writing

37

25

Interaction with university staff

8

12

Advanced grammar and appropriate styles

40

31

Basic grammar

6

1

Survey results – writing



- * About 50% of the respondents went to see a learning skills advisor in the library or their faculty. Most found the service very helpful.
- * There were frequent comments, however, that there was not enough support available:

“It was really helpful but only two learning advisors in the faculty for all postgraduate students (masters & PhD) so they are very busy and students need to make and students need to make appointment one week in advance. Each student is limited for only one hour consultation per week.”

Survey results – writing



- * “We had speaking and writing for our engineering needs from faculty of engineering, but was not enough and couldn't cover all other areas”
- * “The introductory session was really good but way too short. We didn't have time to get deeper into Australian academic writing styles.”
- * “Some weekend skill classes may be? Most of the english skill workshops held by the library are on weekdays but for coursework student, the course timetable may not fit everyone and there is always a chance that these students would missed out.”

Survey results – writing



- * 25 of the HDR students asked their supervisor for help, but one of the the respondents is questioning if this is appropriate:
- * “It was helpful, but I do not think this is what supervisors are for - and I would've benefitted more from a systematic work on my style and grammar, I would like to see my 'constant' mistakes and problems and the ways to avoid them.”

Survey results - speaking



- * The responses revealed that this is an area where students experience a lot of frustration and anxiety.
- * Loss of high level linguistic ability in the new academic environment is felt very acutely:
- * “English is being the second language for us (international postgraduate students) we are daily having some down moments like appearing foolish from of others since we are lacking communication skills.”

Survey results - speaking



There are very limited opportunities for many research students to practice their English, therefore conversation classes are on their wish list:

“Daily conversation. Being a research student, I don't communicate much with people because I spent most of my time doing work in front of my computer. ”

”I think if there is regular event which targeted on improving our confident on speaking English in a gathering or public will help us a lot on our carrier and for mental happiness.”

Survey results - speaking

A comment from an IT student highlighted an interesting fact in his faculty:

“Need to improve my English communication and writing skill. Especially for daily conversation, since I am an IT student, there are not much opportunity to have discussion at class.

The most important thing is, majority of my classmates are international students from certain country and they keep talking in their mother language, and I also cannot find English native-speaker students to communicate with, hence I don't have a lot of chances to practise my English.”

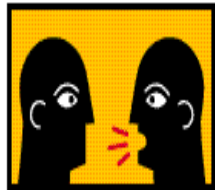
Survey results - speaking

The 2012 Monash University statistics confirm, that the majority of enrolled coursework postgraduates in the IT Faculty are either international or of Non English Speaking Background (NESB)

- * Coursework domestic: 264 including NESB: 51
- * Coursework international: 600



Survey results - speaking



From the list below, please tick the areas in which you would like to get help with your English skill

	Coursework students	Research students
Class room interaction with other students/lecturers/tutors	25	15
Classroom or seminar presentation skills	29	23
Conference presentation skills	30	30
Pronunciation practice	29	25
Social interaction	28	23
Interview skills	32	22
Workplace/placement -specific interaction	27	17

Survey results - reading



- * Understanding Australian media received priority rating both in the coursework and the research student cohort.
- * The **frequent use of abbreviation, slang and humour** in Australian newspapers and other written media equals those in everyday communication.
- * It creates a **considerable hurdle** for newcomers, not familiar with these culture specific expressions.

Survey results - reading

Similarly, overly bureaucratic use of the language can lead to frustration and avoidance:

“And I still think instruction language is quite important too. When I first came to Australia, I always try to avoid reading instructions, including my full offer, bank things as well.”



Survey results - listening



- * Most international students coming to Australia to study would be more familiar with British or American English.
- * One of the characteristics of Australian English is the preference of casual language and humour, even in formal and instructional contexts.
- * Therefore the majority of students ticked “Understanding Australian English – slang, abbreviations, humour etc”.

Survey results - listening



- * “University and teachers really need to be more involved in helping to develop students' English skills. In my first semester I felt lost and confused especially to follow discussions between Australian students and the lecturers because I didn't know the problematic and didn't understand the accent.”

Recommendations and ideas



Academic English:

- * Offer a 1-2 week long orientation program to all commencing postgraduates, including language modules, acculturation components and academic skills development, fully funded by the university (a set percentage of international student fees and local amenities fees could be earmarked for the program)
- * Embedded language development programs, as part of core units, to build on and extend modules taught during the orientation program. Make them part of the first semester curricula for all postgraduate programs.

Recommendations and ideas



Conversational English:

- * Offer ongoing conversation groups for international students focusing on topics and communication skills that enables more collegial and informed discussions with postgraduate colleagues and staff inside and outside the classroom. This could be organized by faculties or a central university body.
- * Employ EFL pronunciation training specialists and make them available for one-on-one sessions for both research and coursework postgraduates. This service should be advertised as a professional skills development program rather than a remedial service.

Recommendations and ideas



Conversational English:

Initiate mentoring schemes during the first semester which guide new postgraduates to make systematic and ongoing use of open access websites such as the “English Language Growth Resource” (ELG)

www.elg.edu.au

or similar programs available at their university.

Recommendations and ideas



English for professional use

As part of the degree/course/curriculum:

- * Authentic work related tasks and assessments and work related units, including language components.
- * Framework to develop language and communication proficiency during course of study – UWA is the first university which has done this.
- * Building a professional portfolio by attending workshops, work experience and volunteering – Curtin University introduced the i-portfolio.

Recommendations and ideas



English for professional use

Cooperation with external bodies:

- * Australian Computer Society (ACS) professional year.
- * University of Newcastle pilot cooperation with the Hunter Region Business Chamber – part time jobs for international postgraduates.
- * Cooperation with local TAFEs, offering/adapting units of competency to needs of international postgrads, e.g
“Communicate and negotiate in a culturally diverse context.”

Further discussion?

- * Special Interest group “Language and Learning”:

ISANA conference

Thursday 5 December

- * 15.30- 16.30pm



Thank you!