

## IMPLICATIONS OF LOW ENGLISH STANDARDS AMONG OVERSEAS STUDENTS AT AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

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*The results of the English tests required of overseas students who obtained permanent residence visas in 2005–06 after graduating reveal that at least a third scored below the level normally required for employment as professionals in Australia. This article explores how students with limited English gained entry to Australian higher education courses in the first place and how they subsequently passed their examinations. It also examines the responses to this situation on the part of the Australian Government and of the Australian accrediting authorities whose task is to assess the adequacy of students' credentials (including English) within their jurisdiction.*

### CURRENT IMMIGRATION REQUIREMENTS FOR ENGLISH SKILLS

Since 1999, people granted visas under Australia's General Skilled Migration Program, which covers most of the migrants granted permanent residence on account of their skills, must demonstrate a minimum standard of English language proficiency. This is band 5 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test. This test is available in two formats—Academic and General Training. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) uses the General Training format. Universities use the Academic format when selecting students for their course programs.

There are four aspects of English (called modules) tested, which are reading, writing, listening and speaking.<sup>1</sup> The listening and speaking modules are the same for both formats. However in the Academic format greater attention is given in the reading and writing modules to educational related tasks than is the case for the General Training format. Applicants for permanent residence must reach level 5 on each of the four modules covered by the General Training test. DIMA defines this standard as 'vocational' English and awards intending migrants who achieve this standard 15 points under the points test employed to assess skilled migrants. Those who achieve

6 or higher on the test receive 20 points. They are referred to as 'competent' speakers.

The focus of this study is the English standards of migrants who were granted permanent residence (PR) visas in 2005–06, with particular reference to former overseas students who have completed tertiary courses in Australia. This is the first group of former overseas students for whom reliable data on their level of English has been available. Around a third of this 2005–06 group did not achieve the 'competent', band 6 English standard. This obviously impacts on their prospects of obtaining professional level employment in Australia. It also raises questions about how overseas students with poor English gained entry to Australian university courses in the first place. DIMA will not issue a higher education student visa to a person located overseas unless they attain band 6 on the IELTS test. Furthermore, how did the overseas students in question manage to complete their university courses satisfactorily, if at the time they took the IELTS test they were not 'competent' English speakers?

Finally what does this evidence tell us about the English language standards required by Australia's accrediting authorities? The Australian government has devolved the responsibility to assess whether the credentials of applicants in their

respective fields, like accounting and IT, meet Australian occupational standards to profession-specific accrediting bodies. In most cases these accrediting bodies are professional associations like the Australian Computer Society in the case of IT or Engineers Australia in the case of engineering. The accrediting bodies may specify the level of English required in their field. For example, the Australian Nursing Council requires a minimum band of 7 on the IELTS test before it will accredit an applicant to proceed with a permanent resident visa application as a nurse.

### OVERSEAS STUDENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERMANENT RESIDENCE

In 1999, the Australian Government introduced a suite of reforms to its skilled migration selection system. Among the most important of these was the granting

of incentives to former overseas students to encourage them to obtain permanent residence on completion of their courses. These incentives included additional points for Australian training and the waiving of the job experience requirement that skilled migrants applying offshore had to meet.

Policy-makers thought that persons who had been trained in Australia, in English, would be more attractive to Australian employers than their counterparts trained overseas, especially if the overseas training had been conducted in a foreign language in a non-western educational setting. In mid-2001 new onshore visa categories for overseas students were introduced which permitted foreign students to apply for permanent residence without having to leave Australia, as long as they applied within six months of completing their training.

The main entry point is the onshore

**Table 1: Visas issued by major occupation group and subclass of visa, 2005–06, General Skilled Migration Program (GSM)—principal applicant only**

| Occupation group                                     | Visa Subclass           |              |                     | Total GSM visas issued |
|--|-------------------------|--------------|---------------------|------------------------|
|  | Subclass 880, 881 & 882 | Subclass 136 | All other GSM visas |                        |
| Accountants, Auditors and Corporate Treasurers       | 6,595                   | 2,619        | 488                 | 9,702                  |
| Computing Professionals                              | 3,589                   | 2,755        | 729                 | 7,073                  |
| Building and Engineering Professionals               | 1,484                   | 1,745        | 811                 | 4,040                  |
| Food Tradespersons                                   | 952                     | 394          | 154                 | 1,500                  |
| Nursing Professionals                                | 229                     | 1,136        | 107                 | 1,472                  |
| Miscellaneous Business and Information Professionals | 432                     | 96           | 897                 | 1,425                  |
| Mechanical Engineering Tradespersons                 | 4                       | 1,057        | 325                 | 1,386                  |
| Electrical and Electronics Tradespersons             | 25                      | 787          | 391                 | 1,203                  |
| Sales, Marketing and Advertising Professionals       | 186                     | 94           | 779                 | 1,059                  |
| Structural Construction Tradespersons                | 3                       | 543          | 306                 | 852                    |
| Other Occupations                                    | 1,884                   | 3,367        | 4,413               | 9,664                  |
| Total  | 15,383                  | 14,593       | 9,400               | 39,376                 |

Source: DIMIA 2005–06, unpublished

independent overseas student visa category (visa subclass 880). In addition there is an Australian sponsored overseas student category (visa subclass 881) and a designated area overseas student category (visa subclass 882). These latter two visa subclasses give further points concessions to applicants sponsored by a relative who is an Australian resident and, in the case of the 882 subclass, if the relative lives in a 'Designated Area' within Australia. The numbers in these two visa subclasses are small relative to the 880 visa subclass.

In a numerical sense these policy initiatives have been spectacularly successful. There were 5,480 onshore visas issued to principal applicants who were former overseas students under the three student visa subclasses in 2001–02. By 2005–06, this number had grown to 15,383. As Table 1 shows, by 2005–06 the number of visas issued to principal applicants in these onshore visa subclasses was similar to the number issued under the main offshore skilled visa subclass within the General Skilled Migration program. This is the Skilled Independent visa category (visa subclass 136).

However, the onshore student program has generated difficult migration management problems, since subsequent research has shown that many of the overseas students visaed have subsequently struggled to find professional level employment in Australia.<sup>2</sup> A key reason is difficulties with English, something which was obviously not anticipated when the initiatives described above were implemented. The issue would be of less concern if it were not for the rapid growth in the numbers involved and the impetus for further expansion. The following analysis provides background on the factors driving this expansion. The study then reviews the data available on the English language skills of overseas students.

## **THE ONSHORE STUDENT PROGRAM: IMPETUS FOR GROWTH**

Australian educational institutions have contributed to this growth. Most universities, and in recent times TAFEs and private providers in the Vocational and Education Training (VET) sector, have sought to attract overseas student enrolments. They have done so by vigorous recruiting and in some cases by establishing metropolitan campuses catering exclusively to overseas students which specialise in the courses that meet the specifications of the relevant accrediting authority. The largest entrant into this market is the Rockhampton based Central Queensland University, which has inner city campuses in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

The expansion in overseas student enrolments in the higher education sector appears to be driven by interest on the part of overseas students wishing to obtain PR. This generalisation is based on evidence that most of the growth in overseas student enrolments in the higher education sector has occurred in courses which potentially lead to a PR outcome within two years and from students who come from countries with a high propensity to seek a PR visa.

Table 2 shows the recent pattern of enrolment of overseas students by course. Almost all the growth has been within the Business Administration, Management category, which include courses in accounting, which satisfy the relevant accrediting authority requirements. Unfortunately, it is not possible to isolate accounting enrolments from the Department of Education Science and Training's (DEST) data set. However, inquiries with the relevant university departments indicate that courses which meet the accounting accreditation standards for immigration purposes are the main beneficiaries of the growth shown in

the Business Administration, Management category shown in Table 2. The table indicates that there was a sharp increase in the number of commencements in this field, apparently at the expense of IT. The likely reason is that since September 2004 accounting has been listed on the Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL). People with occupations on the MODL are allocated an extra 15 points on this basis and a further five points if they have a firm job offer in that occupation from an Australian employer.<sup>3</sup>

Overseas student applicants with

acceptable qualifications in a MODL occupation are virtually assured a PR visa as long as they can reach DIMA's minimum language standard of 'functional' English. By contrast overseas students completing IT courses in Australia currently do not have access to MODL points. There are some IT skill specialities listed on the MODL. But the Australian Computer Society requires at least one year's work experience in the relevant speciality before it will accredit an applicant for MODL points. Consequently, students with an IT degree may not score sufficient points to obtain an 880 visa,

**Table 2: Overseas student commencements at Australian universities by selected fields of education and provider type, 2002 to 2005 (onshore students only)**

| Provider type                         | Year   |        |        |        | Change                 |                            |
|---------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------------------|----------------------------|
|                                       | 2002   | 2003   | 2004   | 2005   | 2002 to 2005<br>Number | Per<br>of students<br>cent |
| <b>Government</b>                     |        |        |        |        |                        |                            |
| Business Administration, Management   | 20,990 | 23,092 | 25,237 | 28,105 | 7,115                  | 34                         |
| Computer Science, Information Systems | 10,798 | 9,871  | 10,848 | 8,129  | -2,669                 | -25                        |
| Economics                             | 2,333  | 2,964  | 2,823  | 2,850  | 517                    | 22                         |
| Education                             | 1,196  | 1,615  | 1,940  | 2,111  | 915                    | 77                         |
| Health, Community Services            | 726    | 765    | 899    | 1,135  | 409                    | 56                         |
| Language Studies                      | 282    | 425    | 500    | 564    | 282                    | 100                        |
| Medical Science, Medicine             | 881    | 1,035  | 1,075  | 1,191  | 310                    | 35                         |
| Nursing                               | 614    | 788    | 1,169  | 1,513  | 899                    | 146                        |
| Services, Hospitality, Transport      | 900    | 1,081  | 1,288  | 1,351  | 451                    | 50                         |
| Other                                 | 16,997 | 18,076 | 18,276 | 17,403 | 406                    | 2                          |
| Total                                 | 55,717 | 59,712 | 64,055 | 64,352 | 8,635                  | 15                         |
| <b>Non-government</b>                 |        |        |        |        |                        |                            |
| Business Administration, Management   | 576    | 412    | 391    | 484    | -92                    | -16                        |
| Computer Science, Information Systems | 217    | 116    | 74     | 60     | -157                   | -72                        |
| Other                                 | 885    | 1,128  | 1,262  | 1,353  | 468                    | 53                         |
| Total                                 | 1,678  | 1,656  | 1,727  | 1,897  | 219                    | 13                         |
| Total                                 | 57,395 | 61,368 | 65,782 | 66,249 | 8,854                  | 15                         |

Source: Australian Education International, unpublished

especially since DIMA increased the pass mark from 115 to 120 on 1 April 2005. Partly as a consequence, as Table 2 shows, commencements in IT contracted in 2005.

Table 3 shows that almost all the growth in overseas student enrolments in the higher education sector from 2002 to 2005 has come from North East Asia (predominantly China) and from Southern and Central Asia (mainly India). The great majority of these students are enrolled in accounting and IT courses.

Further substantiation of the proposition that enrolment growth on the part of overseas students is linked to the pursuit of a PR outcome is shown in Table 4. This indicates that students from South Asia, and to a lesser extent China, have a high propensity to seek PR after completing their courses. Some 74 per cent of those from India obtained an onshore student visa (Table 4). By contrast, students from the countries where enrolments have been

stable or declining have a relatively low propensity to apply for PR. These countries include Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia which, a decade ago, dominated the overseas student market.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE STANDARDS OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS

Since mid-2004 former overseas students who apply for an onshore student visa have been required to take the IELTS test. Prior to mid-2004 it had been DIMA's practice to deem them as having achieved 'competent' English or 6 on the IELTS test and thus they were not required to take the IELTS test. The expectation was that most would have achieved that level in order to gain a student visa and, in any event, would since have honed these skills while living, studying and working here for at least two years. The decision to require a test derived from anecdotal evidence picked up

**Table 3: Overseas student commencements at Australian universities by region of citizenship, 2002 to 2005 (onshore students only)**

| Region                           | Year   |        |        |        | Change 2002–2005   |          |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------------------|----------|
|                                  | 2002   | 2003   | 2004   | 2005   | Number of students | Per cent |
| Americas                         | 3,284  | 3,394  | 3,347  | 3,407  | 123                | 4        |
| North Africa and the Middle East | 894    | 1,072  | 1,197  | 1,417  | 523                | 59       |
| North-East Asia                  | 18,634 | 20,750 | 24,304 | 27,150 | 8,516              | 46       |
| North-West Europe                | 4,268  | 4,221  | 3,999  | 3,663  | -605               | -14      |
| Oceania and Antarctica           | 295    | 285    | 233    | 262    | -33                | -11      |
| South-East Asia                  | 19,960 | 18,625 | 16,835 | 15,209 | -4,751             | -24      |
| Southern and Central Asia        | 7,338  | 10,360 | 13,347 | 12,720 | 5,382              | 73       |
| Southern and Eastern Europe      | 834    | 832    | 753    | 692    | -142               | -17      |
| Sub-Saharan Africa               | 1,792  | 1,769  | 1,733  | 1,691  | -101               | -6       |
| Unknown                          | 96     | 60     | 34     | 38     | -58                | -60      |
| Grand Total                      | 57,395 | 61,368 | 65,782 | 66,249 | 8,854              | 15       |

Source: Australian Education International, unpublished

by DIMA officers that some former students' English language skills were short of the 'competent' standard, despite having completed the courses for which they had been enrolled.

The results of the first year of testing, which were reported in the *Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration Categories*, showed that many applicants did not achieve the 'competent', band 6, standard.<sup>4</sup> There were problems of interpretation with this first set of data, since some of those visaed in 2004–05 were not English tested because they applied before the mid-June starting point of the test requirement. Data

for the program year 2005–06 give a better indication of the English language skills of former overseas students since all of those visaed had to take the test. Table 5 indicates the results for the 880 visa subclass by major country of citizenship.

Overall, 34 per cent of those visaed under the 880 visa subclass did not achieve the 'competent', band 6, English standard on each of the four modules. This group all reached 5 or 5.5 on all four modules of the IELTS test. If they had not reached this level they would have been ineligible to proceed with their visa application. Some 43 per cent of those from China fell short of the

**Table 4: Onshore overseas higher education student completions in Australia 2004 and 880, 881 and 882 Visa approvals 2004–05 by country of citizenship**

| Country                    | All completions 2004 | 880 Visas approved 2004–05 | 881 Visas approved 2004–05 | 882 Visas approved 2004–05 | Rate of completers to visa approvals (per cent) |
|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| China*                     | 7,061                | 2,655                      | 92                         | 53                         | 39.7  |
| Malaysia                   | 4,805                | 1,113                      | 99                         | 83                         | 27.0  |
| India                      | 3,455                | 2,433                      | 47                         | 68                         | 73.7  |
| Indonesia                  | 3,405                | 1,408                      | 112                        | 44                         | 45.9  |
| Singapore                  | 3,226                | 440                        | 47                         | 19                         | 15.7  |
| Hong Kong                  | 2,906                | 863                        | 85                         | 44                         | 34.1  |
| Thailand                   | 2,147                | 200                        | 25                         | 18                         | 11.3  |
| Taiwan                     | 1,313                | 231                        | 29                         | 12                         | 20.7  |
| Korea, Republic of (South) | 1,058                | 474                        | 44                         | 13                         | 50.2  |
| Japan                      | 935                  | 248                        | 6                          | 2                          | 27.4  |
| Canada                     | 820                  | 37                         | 0                          | 0                          | 4.5   |
| Viet Nam                   | 714                  | 200                        | 24                         | 27                         | 35.2  |
| Bangladesh                 | 681                  | 436                        | 28                         | 11                         | 69.8  |
| Sri Lanka                  | 583                  | 360                        | 37                         | 51                         | 76.8  |
| Other countries            | 9,186                | 1,880                      | 180                        | 163                        | 24.2  |
| Total                      | 42,295               | 12,978                     | 855                        | 608                        | 34.1  |

Source: DEST 2004 completion data and DIMIA 2004–05 visa issued data, unpublished

Note: \*Excludes Hong Kong and Taiwan

‘competent’ English standard. This is a significant figure because, as noted, China is the main source of growth in both the numbers of overseas students enrolled in Australian universities and of those gaining PR under the onshore student visa categories.

Table 5 shows that English deficiencies are widespread across the other main source countries. Even in the case of students coming from countries where most would do their secondary education in English, there was a sizeable minority who could not achieve the ‘competent’ English standard. Two examples are Singapore and India, where the proportion not achieving 6 was

17.8 and 17.3 per cent respectively. Almost all of the students who gained permanent residence despite only reaching IELTS band 5 (the English language threshold for migration purposes) did so because their nominated occupation (predominantly accounting) was listed on the MODL. The extra points they received on this account more than compensated for the low score (15 points) they received on the English selection item.

Are the English language results recorded by DIMIA typical of the larger overseas student population? They certainly represent a sizeable share of all overseas students who graduate in Australia. As

**Table 5: 880 Visa approvals by language score and country of citizenship, 2005–06**

| Country                    | Language score |               | Total* | Per cent with language score of 15 |
|----------------------------|----------------|---------------|--------|------------------------------------|
|                            | 15<br>IELTS 5  | 20<br>IELTS 6 |        |                                    |
| China, Peoples Republic of | 1,820          | 2,389         | 4,209  | 43.2                               |
| India                      | 376            | 1,793         | 2,169  | 17.3                               |
| Malaysia                   | 187            | 610           | 797    | 23.5                               |
| Indonesia                  | 240            | 509           | 749    | 32.0                               |
| Hong Kong                  | 293            | 390           | 683    | 42.9                               |
| Bangladesh                 | 201            | 278           | 479    | 42.0                               |
| Korea, Republic of (South) | 249            | 200           | 449    | 55.5                               |
| Sri Lanka                  | 87             | 259           | 346    | 25.1                               |
| Singapore                  | 46             | 212           | 258    | 17.8                               |
| Thailand                   | 89             | 86            | 175    | 50.9                               |
| Japan                      | 64             | 110           | 174    | 36.8                               |
| Vietnam                    | 50             | 102           | 152    | 32.9                               |
| Pakistan                   | 35             | 106           | 141    | 24.8                               |
| Taiwan                     | 63             | 70            | 133    | 47.4                               |
| Nepal                      | 57             | 62            | 119    | 47.9                               |
| Other countries            | 260            | 823           | 1,083  | 24.0                               |
| Total*                     | 4,117          | 7,999         | 12,116 | 34.0                               |

Source: DIMIA 2005–06, unpublished

Note: \*The dataset contained 1,196 ‘blanks’ on the language score variable, these cases have been omitted.

shown in Table 4, just over a third of all overseas students who graduated in Australia in 2004 (at the undergraduate or postgraduate level) obtained a permanent residence onshore student visa in 2004–05. This calculation is based on the assumption that the great majority of onshore student visas in 2004–05 would have been issued to students graduating in 2004 because they are required to complete their application within six months of finishing their Australian training. The 2004–05 visa issued data has been used because the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) has not released data on completions for 2005. The calculation does not take into account those who gained a visa after completing a trade course. However their numbers were small in 2004–05.

The variation in the rate at which students completing university courses obtained an onshore visa imply that this group may not be representative of all overseas students studying in the higher education sector in Australia. Because the Chinese make up such a large share of those gaining a visa (19 per cent in 2004–05) compared with 16.7 per cent of those who completed courses in 2004, there may be a slight bias towards students with weak English. On the other hand, as indicated above, the data on the 12,116 former overseas students for whom Table 5 provides information on their English level exclude those who did reach IELTS band 5 and thus were not able to proceed with a visa application. There is no information available as to the size of this group.

There is no alternative source of firm evidence concerning the English standards of overseas students who graduate from Australian universities, since universities do not test the English skills of those who exit their programs. This is one of the reasons why there has been widespread speculation on the issue. The DIMA results fill a big hole. Though they cover only a subset of

all overseas students these results provide an evidence-based window on the English language skills of this subset. They also happen to be a very important subset, since they are now permanent residents of Australia under the Government's skilled migration program.

## **THE MEANING OF IELTS ASSESSMENT LEVELS**

According to the language specialists consulted in the course of this research there is a large gap between bands 5 and 6 on the IELTS test and between bands 6 and 7 or above. Those who have reached band 5, according to the IELTS Information for Candidates brochure, have a 'partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though likely to make many mistakes'.<sup>5</sup> Their communication capacity is well short of that required to meet Australia's higher education standards or the standards of employers of professionals. Band 6 is much better. Those who have reached this standard can manage normal commercial and social relationships. But people who have reached this standard are still not capable of conducting a sophisticated discourse at the professional level. As Mary Jane Hogan (IELTS Chief Examiner, Australia) put it in a personal communication, many would still be at the stage of translating from their native language to English as they speak, listen or read. It is only at band 7 that they begin to think in English and thus are capable of picking up the nuances of what is written or said when acting as professionals. This is why medicine and nursing authorities in Australia require a minimum band of 7 before an overseas student or a person trained overseas is permitted to practice as a doctor or nurse. It is also why there is very strong evidence that former students who have not advanced beyond level 6 find it very difficult to obtain professional level positions in fields like accounting.<sup>6</sup>

## **HOW PRECISE IS THE IELTS ASSESSMENT MEASURE?**

During the course of 2005–06, there was a three month rule in place, which stipulated that PR visa applicants could only take an IELTS test once every three months. Thus those students wishing to take the IELTS test prior to applying for PR, in effect, had at best only two opportunities. If they did not succeed in achieving level 5 on each of the four modules it would be unlikely they could take a further test because the visa application had to be lodged within six months of the completion of their Australian course.

Thus the results shown in Table 5 represent the outcomes from a very limited number of attempts. Specialists who have conducted IELTS tests indicate that overseas students often achieve quite different individual band scores on each of the modules assessed. For example, a student from India, especially one who had studied in English at a regional Indian university, may do quite well on the reading and writing modules but poorly on the speaking module. Those from China who normally would not have studied at a secondary school or university in English may find writing, as well as speaking in English, tough going. The varying results across the four dimensions may also reflect the applicant's familiarity with the format of the test. Those unfamiliar with the way the test is structured may struggle with what is required on one or other of the modules being measured.

Since 1 April 2006 the three month rule no longer applies. Applicants can take the test as many times as they like, even on consecutive days if they can find a place at one of the IELTS testing centres and can afford the fees (currently \$240 per test). Demand for such places has escalated. It is arguable that the proportion of applicants who obtain a minimum 5 or 6 on each of the modules will increase as a consequence of them becoming familiar with the test. If

so, DIMA will receive more visa applications as a result, especially from those who could not gain 5 on all four modules at their first attempt. This may not mean that the English standard of those applying for PR has improved, but rather that applicants are coping better with the demands of the IELTS test.

Clearly, the IELTS test results have to be interpreted cautiously. Nonetheless they provide a reasonably objective confirmation of what has seemed obvious to many university academics. This is that some of the overseas students they encounter have a limited command of English.

## **ENGLISH STANDARDS IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES**

There are two questions flowing from these findings. The first is, how is it that those who could only achieve 'vocational' English at the time of their PR test, gained entrance to a higher education course in the first place? As noted, for entrants to the Higher Education sector, band 6 is required before such a visa will be issued. The second is, how did these students pass their university examinations?

The key to the first question is that those unable to reach the 'competent' standard when seeking PR probably never reached this standard. (It seems implausible that their English could have deteriorated while in Australia.) There is strong supportive evidence for this hypothesis.

According to DIMA's student visa statistics, in 2005–06 there were 60,197 visas issued offshore which entitled the recipient to begin studies in Australia's higher education or postgraduate research sector. All would have had to possess English language skills equivalent to the band 6 IELTS standard before being offered a university place. In the same year there were 39,045 higher education and post graduate research visas issued onshore. In the case of those from China, there were

11,115 offshore visas and 11,528 onshore visas. There was a similar ratio with several other non-English-speaking background countries. These countries include Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan. By contrast, the great majority of higher education student visas granted to students from India were issued offshore. The implication is that East Asian students (whose English tends to be relatively weak) had to find an alternative pathway into higher education in Australia that did not require them to first achieve level 6 on the IELTS test, whereas those from India did not.

Almost all of those issued a higher education visa onshore would have entered Australia on some other student visa where the English language requirements were less stringent than for a higher education visa. This could be a primary or secondary school visa (IELTS 5 required for direct entry or IELTS 4 if a preceding English language course was included in the package), a non-award course (5.5 required or 5 if the student was contracted to take a preceding English language course), a VET course where the standard required was 5.5 or an English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) (where the visa allows students to enter at band 5, or in some circumstances 4). Once in Australia these students subsequently moved into university courses. Although they have to obtain a new higher education visa before doing so, DIMA does not require a further English test. The Department will issue a higher education visa if the student has completed the required English language course or a foundation year course provided by a university, TAFE or private provider, or in the case of those attending a secondary school if they complete the year 12 Certificate of Education.

The universities do not require an entry level English test for onshore applicants. Like DIMA, they presume that the English language, school and foundation year

courses deliver students who have the requisite English skills. To judge from their level of English as tested by DIMA prior to their visa application this assumption is unjustified.

Another likely contribution to the IELTS test outcomes at the time of the PR application is the standard of English required for the issuance of a higher education visa offshore. Though it is band 6, applicants can achieve this level if their average score across the four modules reaches 6. Applicants who have particular weaknesses, perhaps in writing or speaking English, may achieve an average of 6 because they do better than 6 on the other modules tested. Once in Australia, if their social life is contained amongst their compatriots, where they predominantly speak in their home language, their spoken English may not improve. When they confront the DIMA English test prior to applying for a permanent residence visa, they must score at least 5 on each module. Any deficiency on one of the dimensions, such as speaking, will lead to failure.

### **HOW DO THEY PASS THEIR EXAMINATIONS?**

There is a mountain of anecdotal material that many overseas students struggle to meet their course requirements. Similarly, the coping strategies are well known. Universities cope by lowering the English demands in the courses they teach. This can be accomplished in subjects like accounting and IT by focussing requirements on problems which do not require essay writing skills, or by setting group assignments in which the students with better English help out. Students cope—where they are required to write essays—by getting help from colleagues who are competent English speakers.

To my knowledge very few universities confront the English language problem by requiring a formal English test and then

mandating supplementary English courses for students who are deficient. There is widespread recognition of the English problem. But if a particular university takes unilateral action to require remedial courses this would add to the fees the overseas students must pay and put the institution at a competitive disadvantage relative to the competition.

### **PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITING AUTHORITIES AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE STANDARDS**

As noted, some accrediting authorities, as in the nursing and medical fields, already require a minimum band 7 as one of their criteria for accreditation. But the accrediting authorities covering accounting and IT, which are by far the two most significant occupations for onshore permanent residence visas (see Table 1), have not specified minimum English standards. They have effectively defaulted to the DIMA minimum specified for the General Skilled Migration program, that is 5 across each of the four modules measured in the IELTS test.

This is clearly unsatisfactory, since those with level 5 English appear to have difficulty in functioning as professionals in Australia. The Australian Government has devolved the responsibility of determining whether applicants have the qualifications to work at the professional level in their chosen field to profession-specific accrediting bodies. These bodies are not fulfilling this role if they do not take account of the applicants' English communication skills. In accounting, IT, engineering and the like, there is increasing emphasis in the workplace on communication with clients and colleagues rather than on narrow technical skills. The Australian Computer Society, for example, has not come to grips with this situation.<sup>7</sup> Nor have the accounting bodies. However the director of education in CPA Australia has recently stated that the CPA would support a minimum IELTS level

of 7 for accounting.<sup>8</sup> The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Amanda Vanstone responded by reminding the CPA and the other two accounting accrediting bodies (the Institute of Chartered Accountants and the National Institute of Accountants) that they have the power to set a higher standard. The accrediting authorities have been reluctant to act. One stated concern was that they did not want to take on the function of checking language skills.<sup>9</sup>

### **PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE**

It is unlikely that the universities will act unilaterally on the issue. Their main concern is to maintain growth in their overseas student enrolments. They are self governing, autonomous bodies, not subject to competency audits. There is an audit mechanism conducted by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). It focuses on the processes universities put in place to deliver good teaching and research outcomes. For example AUQA has recently completed an audit of Central Queensland University (CQU).<sup>10</sup> It is at times quite critical, as with CQU's dependence on casual teaching staff in the metropolitan campuses serving overseas students. However there is no reference at all to the English language standards of the overseas students enrolled or to what this might mean for the quality of their educational outcomes.

The overseas students themselves continue to enrol despite the impact that their English language shortcomings may be having on the learning process. They want a good education, but for a large minority the prime concern is to secure a credential which will lead to PR.

The one powerful institution in Australia which has a strong motive to take a lead in this situation is DIMA. As noted above, former overseas students currently constitute nearly half of the migrants selected under its points tested skilled visa

categories. If these graduates lack the communication skills needed in today's skilled labour market this presents a serious threat to one of DIMA's objectives, that is to supply skilled workers in areas of shortage which are crucial to the functioning of the Australian economy.

Reflecting these concerns, the Australian Government is about to short-circuit the situation described above. Following the publication of the *Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration Categories* report in March 2006, the Ministers for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and Education, Science and Training announced that from mid-2007, the 'base level of English language proficiency' needed to gain a general skilled migration visa will be increased.<sup>11</sup> This is likely to mean that the threshold English language requirement for such visas will be raised from 5 to 6 on all four modules of the IELTS test. The two Ministers also indicated that they favour an increase in the points awarded to applicants with English above band 6.<sup>12</sup>

This leadership increases the likelihood that the accrediting authorities will take a tougher line on English standards. As

indicated, CPA Australia has already announced its readiness to do so and my discussions with assessing authorities suggests that they are likely to converge on band 7 as the appropriate minimum standard for professional occupations. It will take little administrative effort to implement this standard. All the accrediting authorities need to do is to require that applicants submit the results of their English language test—required as part of their visa application—along with their academic credentials when they seek accreditation for immigration purposes.

These prospects imply that universities will have to pay closer attention to the English language standards of overseas students. If there is no guarantee that students will be able to meet the higher English language standards when they finish their courses then those with an interest in PR are less likely to enrol in the first place. It is to be hoped that this sets in place a virtuous circle as universities strive to provide courses which will meet both the curriculum demands of the respective professions and the necessary communication standards.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.ielts.org/>>.
- <sup>2</sup> B. Birrell, L. Hawthorne and S. Richardson, *Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration Categories*, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Canberra, March 2006, p. 76
- <sup>3</sup> For further detail of the current points system and the implications of MODL listing see *ibid*, Chapter One.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30
- <sup>5</sup> IELTS, Information for candidates, May 2006
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 84-87; B. Birrell, *The Changing Face of the Accounting Profession in Australia*, CPA Australia, 2006
- <sup>7</sup> B. Kinnaird, 'The impact of the skilled migration program on domestic opportunity in information technology', *People and Place*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2005, pp. 73-74
- <sup>8</sup> *Australian Financial Review*, 22 November 2006
- <sup>9</sup> *Australian Financial Review*, 27 November 2006
- <sup>10</sup> Australian Universities Quality Agency, Report of an Audit of Central Queensland University, February 2006
- <sup>11</sup> Joint Media Release Senator Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and Julie Bishop, Minister for Education, Science and Training, 8 May 2006
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*