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ENGLISH LANGUAGE STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS

Dr Neil Murray, University of Warwick

Implications for policy and practice

- Universities have an ethical responsibility to ensure that the methods they use to assess applicants' English language capabilities are fit for purpose, and that students accepted onto courses have a realistic chance of graduating.

- They should consider ways of increasing the integrity of current assessment procedures while investing in more support for students to develop their language skills post-enrolment.

- Academic and administrative staff should be supported to gain a better understanding of what test scores are likely to mean in terms of real-life performance on degree courses.

- Security measures should be continually reviewed, for example to ensure applicants are not taking online tests under false credentials.

About this briefing

This briefing provides a critique of the English language tests used by universities to assess whether international students have the required levels of English language proficiency to be admitted onto degree programmes.

The key question is whether universities' English language requirements are set appropriately and whether English language gatekeeping tests assess the right kind of language such that students have a realistic chance of successfully graduating. A potential tension exists between ensuring rigorous educational standards and the need to meet financial imperatives through overseas tuition fees.

Context

International students applying to study in the UK and other English speaking countries are required to meet minimum standards of English language proficiency. In the UK, minimum requirements are set by the Home Office Border Agency as part of the Government's efforts to control levels of immigration, although universities typically set their own language requirements which may exceed the minimum required for visa purposes.

However, the UK Council for International Student Affairs found that 62 per cent of institutions it surveyed said they would admit students with less than the minimum stated language requirements (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2009). In addition, evidence suggests that even where minimum language requirements are met, students whose first language is not English often still struggle to cope with their studies (Birrell, 2006; Arkoudis et al. 2012; Matthews 2012).

This indicates a problem in one or more of the following areas considered in this briefing paper:

- The effectiveness of the English language tests.
- The way in which such tests are understood and used by universities.
- The rigour with which universities uphold the standards they have put in place.
- The security of the administration of the tests.

Are English language proficiency tests fit for purpose?

Numerous studies have been conducted in recent years to investigate the validity of pre-enrolment language assessment tests, but it is difficult to determine causal links between language proficiency and subsequent academic performance. The tests employed by English-speaking universities around the world also usually take a broad brush approach and do not account for discipline-specific language demands. Paradoxically, however, discipline-specific tests would require particular language knowledge that many students may not acquire until starting their degree course and to which they may have had different levels of exposure depending on their secondary school curriculum and the country in which they studied. While language tests may not be ideally suited for purpose, it is hard to discern practical alternatives. What is important is that their strengths and weaknesses are sufficiently understood by those who use them.

How are tests understood and used by universities?

The need to understand the difference between what tests claim to be able to do and what their scores indicate in real terms has not been adequately addressed by the sector. Typically, universities benchmark their tests against competitor institutions, although this process is liable to be compromised by the tension between upholding academic standards on one hand and not losing market share of international students on the other. Academic staff and administrators should be helped to gain a better sense of what test scores mean in practice. For example, test scores could be included on attendance registers, ID cards or essay submissions (subject to opt-in from students), to help increase awareness among staff of how they relate to performance. On this basis, it could be argued that test comparability across institutions would not be critical as long as institutions are confident that particular test results are likely to translate into a certain level of performance.

Upholding English language standards

While language thresholds are typically set at institutional level, individual departments will often opt to set their own entry requirements which may exceed those thresholds and specify scores for particular sub-skills. Universities and departments also have to consider when they should make exceptions, for example in cases where a student may not meet minimum standards but shows exceptional academic potential.

Test security

The number of students wishing to study in English-medium universities has increased dramatically in recent years. However, accompanying this has been a widespread increase in students providing false credentials or having friends sit language tests on their behalf. This security weakness is aggravated by the rise in computer-based tests, which are more susceptible to abuse. In the UK, the Home Office Visas & Immigration Service has tried to clamp down on students seeking to secure study visas under false credentials, placing much of the onus on receiving institutions. There has been a concerted effort to introduce new security measures but test developers will need to stay at the top of their game in this regard.

Conclusion

Universities have an educational and ethical responsibility to ensure that the methods they use to assess language proficiency are reliable and applied with as much veracity as possible. Moving towards more discipline-specific testing has both benefits and challenges but would need to be supported sector-wide, as change led by individual universities would risk their market competitiveness. One option is to consider ways of refining the current processes while at the same time offering more robust and better-funded provision to support students to continue developing their English language skills post-enrolment.

Contact the researcher

Dr Neil Murray, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick

N.L.Murray@warwick.ac.uk

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ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL