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Citation:

Leggott, DL (2011) Support for international students at Leeds Metropolitan. *Assessment, Teaching and Learning Journal*, 11. 107 - 118. ISSN 1756-8781

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Support for international students at Leeds Metropolitan

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Living in a new country and studying in a different language within an unfamiliar education system can be extremely rewarding for the individual concerned, and having international students on campus can hugely enrich the environment of the host institution. International students bring different perspectives, can be demanding but also refreshing, and their presence can facilitate intercultural awareness and experience (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Montgomery, 2009), which are highly-valued attributes in today's globalised marketplace.

Living and studying abroad can, however, also represent a significant challenge for those involved. Every single person who has contact with international students has a significant role to play in supporting them through the different stages of this experience. In addition to developing their own practice to draw upon to respond to international students, one of the ways in which staff can achieve this is by being aware of all of the English language and other support mechanisms in place within the University to support students throughout this process.

After outlining ways in which an international student might evidence his/her English level and highlighting one or two points in relation to this, this article will focus on the support offered through the university preparation courses for international students and the staff development opportunities for academic and support staff within Leeds Metropolitan University. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the many other forms of support typically available for international students at UK universities, but further details about this topic can be found in UKCOSA (2007).

What difference does half an IELTS point make?

The level of English proficiency of international students studying within an English-speaking environment is often linked with the quality of their experience as students (both inside and outside the classroom) or with their achievement. Matsumoto et al (2001) discuss the relationship between low English language proficiency and difficulties in integration and the ensuing effects of this, while McKinlay et al (1996) link low English language proficiency to psychological distress. In addition, Benzie (2010) expresses concern about the low levels of English proficiency among international students who graduate from degree courses. The perceived difficulties regarding international students' level of English mirror the experience of academics (Barron et al, 2010), and this is reflected in the existence of English language proficiency admissions requirements at all UK, Australian and American universities (and elsewhere, with delivery being increasingly offered in English in many other countries). It may be worth noting that such requirements are far from consistent and the Leeds Met requirement of an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 6.0 represents neither the highest nor the lowest required by universities. Given the importance generally attributed to English language proficiency, it is important that academic colleagues have some understanding of the requirements applied in this institution.

Support for international students starts at the course application stage. Any non-native speaker of English who applies to study at Leeds Met is required to provide evidence that their level of English is high enough for them to stand a reasonable chance of successfully completing their course. The University accepts several internationally recognised English language tests, including IELTS (International English Language Testing System, n.d.), TOEFL (2011) and Pearson Test of English Academic (Pearson, 2011). According to the International Office (personal communication, 2011), IELTS is the most commonly used form of evidence by international students applying for courses at this University.

The IELTS test consists of four components: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and students are given a score for each component as well as an overall

score (International English Language Testing System, n.d.). IELTS bands range from IELTS 1.0 (the lowest) to 9.0 (the highest). A student who gains an overall score of 6.0 is considered to be a “competent user”, defined by IELTS (International English Language Testing System, n.d.) as “has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations”. Most of the undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Leeds Met have an English language entry level of IELTS 6.0 with at least 5.0 required in each test component, though a few require a higher score.

Students with an IELTS band of 6.0 overall may have a lower level of English in one or two of the test components. For example, they may be able to express themselves quite clearly in a one-to-one discussion with a course tutor, but one or two of their other skills, such as writing and reading, may be of a considerably lower level. That is the reason why a mere interview with a tutor is not a reliable way of determining whether a student’s English level is high enough for admission onto their preferred course of study.

To some staff, and indeed some students, it may seem that the University’s standard English language entry requirement of IELTS 6.0 is just a bit higher than IELTS 5.5, but it is important to realise that it can take an international student one semester of specialised English language teaching, learning and continuous assessment to increase their IELTS score by just half an IELTS point. This improvement is on the basis of, typically, 20 hours of class contact time a week and formative feedback on a continuous basis.

The language barrier is not the only challenge that international students may face. The assessment, learning and teaching (ALT) methods used in higher education in this country may be very different from those experienced in the students’ previous educational experience, so it can take time for them to comprehend the expectations of university higher education in the UK and learn to apply study and research skills appropriate to this study context. Lecturers may at times assume that the students’ lack of participation in a session is due to the language barrier, when it may be due

more to differences in the academic culture (Trahar, 2007).

International students can improve their English in preparation for university study in the UK by taking an English language or IELTS preparation course prior to taking the IELTS test. These courses tend to focus on improving the students' English language level and exam technique, but may not include elements relating to the skills required to adapt to a different academic culture. Bespoke university preparation courses, however, include both language and appropriate study and research skills.

Leeds Metropolitan University's Academic English programmes

The suite of Academic English courses offered by the English Language Teaching subject group of the Carnegie Faculty ensures that an appropriate programme of study is available for any student, undergraduate or postgraduate, at any English language level except beginner. Within our University, therefore, very few international applicants ever need to be rejected for their desired course because of their level of English, as the University will almost always be able to offer them a personalised study plan comprising relevant university preparation course(s) followed by their chosen main course of study.

University Preparation Courses for postgraduate students

Five courses offered by English Language Teaching are designed to prepare international students for postgraduate study:

- The *International Masters* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011a) is a one-and-a-half to two-year programme (depending on start date) for students with an HND plus IELTS 5.0 or equivalent. The first two semesters consist of eight modules

(120 credits at Level 6) of Academic English, study and research skills, and normally one module related to the student's chosen Masters. This is followed by one of a range of Masters offered by the University. This combined programme makes the UK Border Agency's (2011) visa application process for international students less onerous, as students receive one combined offer for both their English and Masters courses and do not need to renew their visa between their English course and their Masters. This programme is currently being piloted with courses offered within the Carnegie Faculty and course leaders/subject group leaders in other Faculties who may be interested in being involved in this unique, attractive programme are advised to contact the author of this paper for further information. Students with an Honours Degree and/or IELTS 5.5 can also benefit from this course.

- Students whose chosen Masters course is not included in the International Masters pilot, who are still unsure which Masters to take, or who wish to progress onto a PhD, can take the *Graduate Diploma in English Language and Education Studies* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011b). This is a two-semester, Level 6 programme for students with IELTS 5.0 or equivalent, though students with IELTS 5.5 and an Honours Degree (or equivalent) may be eligible to take the fast-track one-semester option.
- The *10-week Pre-Sessional* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011c), which runs from June to August each summer, is for students with at least IELTS 5.5 who wish to progress onto either an undergraduate or postgraduate course.
- As mentioned above, the academic culture of university study in the UK may be very different from that of the students' previous learning experience. The new *4-week Pre-Sessional* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011d), delivered in August, focuses on the development of skills of particular relevance to study in this academic culture. Only students with an unconditional offer for their undergraduate or postgraduate course can study this programme.
- Postgraduate students who do not meet the English language entry requirements for the above courses can take *Introduction to Academic English* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011e), during which they will develop their general

English as well as covering some main principles of academic English, with the aim of increasing their English level to that required for one of the other university preparation courses outlined above.

This suite of Academic English courses for postgraduate international students contributes towards the University's aims to increase international and postgraduate student recruitment, as they offer a clear pathway to students whose academic background or English level currently prevent them from gaining an unconditional offer directly onto their chosen Masters or PhD.

University Preparation Courses for undergraduate students

Two courses provide general and Academic English preparation for undergraduate international students:

- The *CertHE International Foundation Studies* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011f) is a two-semester programme for students with academic qualifications of AS-level and IELTS 4.5 or equivalent. Successful completion of this programme guarantees entry onto a wide range of the University's undergraduate courses (ibid).
- Students with a lower level of English can take the *Introduction to Academic English* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011e), successful completion of which leads to guaranteed entry onto the CertHE International Foundation Studies.

Academic English support for current undergraduate and postgraduate students

As is the case in most universities in the UK (UKCOSA, 2007), every non-native speaker of English who is already enrolled on an undergraduate or postgraduate course is entitled to study the University's Academic English programme, *ECIS – How to Study in the UK* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011g) which is free of

charge for international students, as it is funded pro rata and at cost by the Faculties of the participants' main course of study. Several of the sessions on this course are offered on Saturdays in order to avoid timetable clashes.

All of the Academic English courses are accredited by the British Council (n.d.) and inspected every three years. The tutors are fully qualified at postgraduate level to teach English to international students.

All of these Academic English programmes incorporate three main elements:

1. English language development, including both general and Academic English. This includes taking notes from lectures, effective reading and note-making, presentation and seminar skills and the conventions of academic writing.
2. The academic and study skills required at undergraduate or postgraduate level, including reflection, critical thinking, independent learning, time management, relating theory to practice, research skills, referencing, and other skills to help students to avoid plagiarism.
3. The academic culture of higher education in this country. This incorporates many elements which subject lecturers may take for granted, such as the difference between a lecture and a seminar, different types of assessment, the use of assessment criteria, the marking and external examiner systems, making best use of formative feedback and the fact that most modules do not have just one set textbook as students are expected to read widely using a range of sources.

Students who successfully complete one of the University's Academic English programmes are, therefore, likely to be better prepared for their studies than those who enter directly onto their chosen undergraduate or postgraduate programme. As former Pre-Masters student, Wang Yang (personal communication, 2008), commented, "I don't think it is as easy to get a degree here as in my country, as you need study skills and just following the teacher isn't enough."

Staff development for an internationalised university

The support for international students does not end with encouraging them to attend an appropriate Academic English programme, either prior to commencing or during their studies. The true benefits of having international students on campus can only be realised if an ethos of internationalisation is pervasive across the institution (Jones and Brown, 2007) and if all staff working with international students across the university are aware of the issues these students may face and offer suitable support. Many examples of this type of awareness and understanding are in evidence across the University (Folley, Wilkinson and Thomson, 2009; Dean, 2009, to name just two).

The English Language Teaching subject group offers bespoke internal staff development sessions which aim to facilitate the dissemination of good practice relating to the academic and pastoral support of international students across the University.

Some of the sessions focus on raising colleagues' awareness of the international student support mechanisms available within the University. For example, some colleagues may not be aware that the University employs a full-time Language Learning Advisor, Mike Forshaw, based in Headingley Campus Library, who can offer international students valuable one-to-one or small group academic support. As well as helping them to analyse their individual English language learning needs, and identifying suitable resources to improve their English, he can guide them in their development of relevant study skills or strategies for effective language learning. Pastoral support is offered through the International Student Welfare Advisor, Karen Griffith, who is trained to assist students with their visa renewals or enquiries and who can offer a sympathetic ear and practical help when international students face problems relating to culture shock, finance, health or other aspects of their non-academic lives in the UK.

Other sessions, all of which are participative and often use the participants' personal experience of international students as a starting point, include:

- Intitot? Language awareness when working with international students
- Put yourself in their shoes – understanding life (and HE) in the UK from an international student’s perspective
- International students – benefit or burden?”
- Expectations and reality – what level of English should staff expect of students with IELTS 6.0?

Workshops can be organised, upon request, for senior managers, subject group leaders, course leaders and tutors, admissions tutors, course administrators and other groups of academic or support staff. Other staff development opportunities are offered on the University’s People Development Programme and within the Centre for Learning and Teaching ‘8th of the month’ series, by colleagues experienced in related areas such as cross-cultural capability, global perspectives, inclusive group work, and so forth. As noted at the start of this article, international students are a positive asset to the University and their home student peers, but understanding how best to ensure academic practices enable students to work effectively together requires professional capabilities.

New insights into international students’ needs can also be gained through cross-discipline and cross-Faculty peer observation, either of an Academic English class taught by an English language tutor, or by an English language tutor of a class delivered in another subject area. By observing classes held in other subject areas, English language tutors’ awareness of the experiences students are likely to have when they begin their undergraduate or postgraduate programme is increased and this can feed directly into our curriculum design and delivery. By observing an Academic English class, colleagues from other disciplines can gain an insight into the type of preparation international students can receive before they commence their main programme of study.

When such sessions were run across the University in recent years, it became

apparent that the discussion points, concerns and issues expressed by staff were often common across the University, but colleagues had few easy means of sharing good practice or discussing international student support and other aspects of internationalisation with colleagues in other Faculties. To this end, the English Language Teaching subject group has set up the mainly online 'Bridges' Internationalisation Forum for Leeds Met staff, which currently has over 100 academic and administrative staff members. Further information about this can be obtained from the author.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted some of the support mechanisms available to international students at Leeds Met and has recognised the strengths which international students bring to their new study environment.

It started by outlining a few points about international students' English language level, particularly in relation to the standard University entry requirement of IELTS 6.0. For some staff their only understanding of this may be as a lecturer or course administrator who has had international students on their course. Awareness of the Academic English support available, as well as discussions created through staff development sessions or peer observation, are some ways in which we can ensure that our international students' needs are met as fully as possible.

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