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Are onshore pathway students prepared for effective university participation? A case study of an international postgraduate cohort

Bronwen Dyson

Postgraduate Writing, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

Email: Bronwen.Dyson@sydney.edu.au

As English language (EL) proficiency becomes a key issue for Australian universities, EL entry levels and the pathways preparing international students for university are also rising in importance. Crucially, according to recent Australian government policy, universities are responsible for ensuring that students entering university have sufficient EL competence to participate effectively in their courses. This policy has its origins in concerns as to whether the large number of entrants from onshore (Australian) pathways have possessed adequate English skills. Despite these concerns, there has been little examination of this issue. The present study aimed to examine whether one cohort of onshore international postgraduate students was prepared for effective university participation. Three measures of participation were employed: student perceptions of preparation, English written proficiency and university grades. The study comprised two phases. In the first phase, the students ($N = 173$) completed a questionnaire on pathway preparation and wrote an essay. The results for the essay were further divided into those who entered and did not enter university. In the second phase, focus interviews were conducted ($N = 8$) and academic grades were collected from those who completed first semester subjects ($N = 106$) and their peers. The study revealed that the students perceived their academic skills as better than their language skills, did not receive significantly different grades to their peers but exhibited high levels of "at risk" writing, especially in their use of source material and grammar. The paper concludes that increased university monitoring of pathways on a range of key, language-related measures, particularly writing, is vital.

Key words: international students, onshore pathways, English language proficiency, academic achievement, student perceptions.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, Australian tertiary enrolments of international students have mushroomed via *onshore* English language pathways. Onshore pathways offer preparatory courses within the Australian setting and, thus, contrast with offshore pathways which prepare students for Australian university entry within their countries of origin. Onshore pathways include schools, vocational education and training (VET) courses, other programs (e.g. foundation courses for undergraduate students), and English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS). Of crucial importance here is the scale of these onshore enrolments: since 2002, onshore pathways have provided universities with the majority of their commencing international students (Australian Education International, 2006, 2008, 2012). The major onshore route for these enrolments is ELICOS, a network of colleges and centres, some attached

to universities, which aims to develop general and academic English language proficiency. In 2011, 29,388 university students (43% of total international students) recorded some prior study in ELICOS (Australian Education International, 2012, p. 6).

With this dramatic rise in enrolments from onshore pathways, universities, policy-makers and teachers have faced the question of whether this route prepares students sufficiently well for university. Arguing that they did not, Birrell (2006) claimed that ELICOS "fast-tracked" international students by satisfying Australian university proficiency requirements via in-house assessment rather than formal English tests such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System). This claim, and associated media coverage, was accompanied by moves within the ALL (Academic Language and Learning) profession (e.g. Barthel, 2007) and government (e.g. DEET, 2008) for a policy framework which would ensure that universities developed the English language (EL) proficiency of international students and English as an Additional Language (EAL) students generally. In the resulting policy documents – *Good Practice Principles for the English language proficiency of international students in Australian universities* (AUQA, 2009) and *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Threshold Standards* (TEQSA, 2011) – pathway entry was granted a specific clause, Course Accreditation Standard 3.2 being:

> The higher education provider ensures that students who are enrolled are
> sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in
> the course of study and achieve its expected learning outcomes and sets
> English language entry requirements accordingly (TEQSA, 2011, p. 15).

To ascertain whether ex-pathway students are sufficiently prepared for the linguistic demands of university, AUQA (2009, p. 6) suggested university monitoring noting that "simple measures of aggregate academic performance by cohort may not provide sufficient information". However, few universities have taken up this challenge (AUQA, 2009, p. 8) and there is a scarcity of published scholarship based on either aggregate (e.g. GPA [Grade Points Average]) or other measures. As a result, we remain largely uninformed about how onshore pathway students actually perceive their preparation, use English, and perform academically. The present study aimed to examine whether one cohort of international onshore students was prepared for effective university participation. It employed three measures of participation: student perceptions of preparation, English written proficiency, and academic grades. This paper argues that, to ensure the required level of English competence, university monitoring should be not only broad but also able to capture key, language-related aspects of participation, particularly written proficiency. This paper surveys existing literature on pathways to university, outlines the methodology of the case study, presents the results and discusses their implications.

2. Previous studies on onshore pathways

The scholarship on onshore pathways forms part of the growing literature on the education and experience of international and EAL students (e.g. Dunworth & Briguglio, 2011). While few studies have been conducted on either offshore (e.g. Lai, Nankerris, Story, Hodgson, Lewenberg, & MacMahon Ball, 2008) or onshore pathways, the research on the onshore route surveyed here has contributed to debate about the university preparation of international students.

In drawing national attention to the problematic outcomes of onshore pathways, Birrell (2006) highlighted the importance of English language proficiency as a factor in the preparation of international students. This study analyzed Department of Education, Science and Training and Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 2004 visa approvals to international graduates from Australian universities who, upon seeking permanent residence, were required to sit the IELTS test. Although these students were required to have the equivalent of an IELTS score of 6.0 or 6.5 (a "competent" level) in order to enter university, the analysis demonstrated that following graduation, 34.1% (12,116) achieved 5 or 5.5 on all four modules (speaking, listening, reading and writing). Birrell (2006) concluded that these students had never gained band 6, having entered Australia on a visa which accepted lower IELTS bands and completed

onshore courses which enabled them to enter university as non-test entrants via internal assessment procedures.

To pinpoint the interaction between language proficiency and academic skills, Oliver, Vanderford, and Grote (2012) analyzed the English Language Proficiency (ELP) entry modes and aggregate academic scores in the database of one Australian university. The 25 forms of acceptable ELP entry were compared to WAMs (Weighted Average Marks), a measure of academic achievement based on the number of credit points per unit and hence equivalent to the Grade Point Average (GPA) score used by other institutions. Students who submitted ELP non-test evidence tended to have lower WAM scores than students who sat for standardized tests. For example, WAMs under 50 (Fail) were awarded to 33.3% of the students who attended the University entrance bridging course (and entered by non-test mode) compared to 10.27% of the group which sat the IELTS test.

For some, however, this emphasis on proficiency neglects the importance of academic achievement – and individual factors – for university participation. Woodrow, Hirst, and Phakti (2011) investigated an undergraduate (Foundation) cohort of international students from the perspectives of ELP, academic scores and other variables. This study employed two ELP scores (IELTS upon entering the program and the Foundation English result), and two academic scores (GPA upon program exit and from the first two university semesters). By correlation, the authors found that both ELP scores were predictive of academic success at university, the Foundation English ($R^2 = 34\%$) more than IELTS ($R^2 = 17\%$), but that the program exit GPA ($R^2 = 44\%$) was the most predictive score. Using quantitative (e.g. questionnaires) and qualitative (e.g. interviews) measures at the pathway and university, they also investigated the role of individual differences and found that individual factors, particularly self-efficacy, predicted academic success. The interviews with students revealed that, at university, the students experienced considerable difficulties with aspects of university life, including participating in tutorials.

Benzie (2011) also questions the emphasis on proficiency, in this case by examining the contribution of pathway curriculum to university preparation. The study compared the course overviews/introductions taught in a postgraduate onshore pathway with those used in the Business course in the target university. The study located more authoritarian and generic approaches in the former and more ambiguous and complex disciplinary nuances in the latter. Benzie (2011, p. 15) concluded: "This mismatch suggests students may find that practices in the discipline vary from those they have learned in the Pathway program".

Studies thus far suggest that language proficiency, academic achievement, and other factors impact upon the university participation of onshore pathway students, although the relative contribution of these variables remains controversial. This study does not intend to clarify this issue by focusing on the comparison of variables, but wishes to open up the debate by moving beyond the reliance on aggregate – either academic or proficiency – scores. A previously unexplored issue is whether pathway students perform differently in terms of academic grades to their peers. Another issue is how the students perceive the pathway before leaving it, particularly in terms of academic and proficiency skills. Of utmost importance is that we have little idea of how these students actually use English, particularly written English. As Lillis and Scott (2007, p. 9) argue, data on writing are particularly important since "Students' written texts continue to constitute the main form of assessment and such writing is a 'high stakes' activity in university education". Postgraduate students deserve special attention since, as yet, no study has collected data from this group.

Consequently, the present study addressed the following research question:
Do international postgraduate students trained in an onshore pathway indicate that they can participate effectively in university via their perceptions of preparation, written English proficiency, and university grades?

3. Methodology

To capture the progression of a cohort of international students from an onshore pathway to university, the study was conducted in two phases: Phase 1 at the pathway and Phase 2 at university (see Table 1). This section outlines these phases.

Table 1. Overview of the methodology.

Phases	Participants	Status of participants	Indices of participation	Instruments
Phase 1 At the pathway	173	Aiming to enter university	Student perceptions	Questionnaire
	173	Aiming to enter university	Writing	MASUS Procedure*
	117	Recommended to enter university	Writing	MASUS Procedure
Phase 2 At university	8	Enrolled in one faculty	Student perceptions	Focus groups
	106	Enrolled in a range of faculties	Academic results	Database of university academic results

* MASUS (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students) Procedure (Bonanno & Jones, 2007).

3.1. At the pathway: Setting, participants, instruments and data analysis

Phase 1 was set in an ELICOS centre which contributed approximately 600 to 700 (mostly postgraduate) students per annum to its target, an Australian research-intensive university. There were two types of pre-entry courses. Both ten weeks in duration, one was an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course and the other was a discipline-oriented Direct Entry course. Students could enter these courses either by achieving IELTS band 6 or, in the case of the EAP course, by satisfactorily completing a prior advanced course which was not IELTS tested. Both pre-entry courses – the EAP and Direct Entry – aimed to develop to (at least) IELTS 6.5, the minimum university requirement. They respectively assessed university entrance by an in-house proficiency test and weekly assignments.

The participants in this phase were 173 students who were finishing university-preparation courses and who consented to participate in the study. This group, which constituted 51% of the total in the preparation courses, was predominantly postgraduate (97%), male (60%), Chinese in origin (88%), and studying in one faculty, Business (84%). On average, they had learned English for 10 years, spent 5.8 months at the pathway and, on their last IELTS test (i.e. prior to entering the Centre), had gained the following average scores: 6.1 (overall), 6.2 (listening), 5.9 (speaking), 6.3 (reading) and 5.7 (writing). At the end of their 10 week course, they attained an average overall IELTS score of 7.1. On the basis of their IELTS-equivalent scores of 6.5 or above, 117 of this group were "Recommended" for university entry ("Recommended" students) and 52 students were not ("Not Recommended" students). The "Recommended" students were then offered places in the University while the "Not Recommended" remained at the Centre.

Two instruments were employed to collect data on student perceptions of the pathway and their proficiency in written English. Respectively, these were a self-report questionnaire and an essay following an adapted version of the MASUS (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students) Procedure (Bonanno & Jones, 2007).

The self-report questionnaire was designed to uncover student perceptions of whether the pathway had prepared them effectively for university participation. The questions were informed by discussions with pathway graduates, surveys used previously with international

students (e.g. Mullins, Quintrell, & Hancock, 1996) and Applied Linguistics questionnaire design (Dörnyei, 2010). This paper focuses on two questions (6 and 7) which concern academic and linguistic preparation. In Question 6, the students were asked to rate ten statements regarding their preparation on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree), with 3 signifying "Don't know" (see Appendix A). In Question 7, the students were asked to provide reasons for their answers to Question 6.

The essay task based on the MASUS Procedure aimed to diagnose strengths and weaknesses in the students' writing. The MASUS Procedure was used due to its theoretical and empirical strengths. Theoretically, its grounding in systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1985) lets MASUS assess language as a meaning-making resource within contexts of use, particularly within university disciplines. Empirically, this procedure is supported by corpora of students' disciplinary writing and studies of its utility (e.g. Scouller, Bonanno, Smith, & Krass, 2008), validity and reliability (Erling & Richardson, 2011).

While MASUS is a Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELA), this study adapted it for assessing the written proficiency of the pre-entry cohort. A week prior to the essay task, the students were given a pre-reading on Business Ethics – a required topic at the pathway – and then, on test day, were asked to respond to the issues in the article by writing an essay, referring to the reading if desired. The essay question was as follows:

> The article discusses a range of ethical dilemmas facing business today. It is essential that managers recognise that they have ethical obligations not only to their businesses but also to wider society. Discuss this statement.

These instruments were employed with the entire cohort of 173 students on one day at the end of their pathway courses. To gather the data under controlled conditions, teachers from the pathway acted as invigilators while the essay was written and then, to avoid potentially influencing the outcome, left the room while students completed the questionnaire. The essay took 1 hour and the entire questionnaire approximately 20 minutes.

The analysis of Question 6 of the questionnaire was quantitative and established means, standard deviations and statistical significance. The analysis of Question 7 was qualitative and identified themes. The data of the entire cohort ($N = 173$) was analyzed without further division since the anonymous nature of the questionnaires did not permit further division.

The analysis of the essays consisted of two main steps: the marking and the statistical analysis. Markers experienced in academic literacy marked all essays (N = 173). An initial briefing told the markers to evaluate each script according to the four obligatory MASUS Areas (or criteria):

- "Use of source material" (Area A)
- "Structure and development of the answer" (Area B)
- "Academic writing style" (Area C)
- "Grammatical correctness" (Area D).

An "A" (appropriate) or "NA" (not appropriate) was to be allocated for each sub-criterion and, from this, a rating from 1 to 4 (with 1 signifying "poor" and 4 signifying "excellent") was to be given. Anonymous scripts were then distributed to the markers who marked them independently. When at least half of each marker's load had been marked, a representative subset of marked scripts and accompanying assessment sheets were "pooled" at the first standardization meeting. If markers diverged on their rating for a particular criterion, the group discussed the matter until consensus was reached. Although initial ratings were then adjusted accordingly, feedback from the markers indicated that a further standardization meeting was necessary. As a result of this meeting, the markers felt confident that they were marking consistently. From the standardization process, a set of descriptors for the four Areas and their sub-criteria were prepared. For each of the essays, the markers calculated sub-totals for the four Areas (each out of 4) and total marks (out of 16).

Statistical analyses were conducted on the individual MASUS scores of the total cohort and the "Recommended" group who entered university. This step was possible for the essays (although not the questionnaires) since only essays were identified by name. The scores were divided

according to whether the students were "Recommended" ($N = 117$) and "Not Recommended" ($N = 52$), the difference in total scores compared to the questionnaire ($N = 173$) being due to the exclusion of four essays since they could not be matched with the name of "Recommended" or "Not Recommended" student. Means and standard deviations were calculated on scores for each MASUS Area and overall. Then, the number and proportion of "at risk" scripts were computed, according to two definitions: ≤ 10 for the total mark and ≤ 2 for each of the four Areas. A mark under 2 indicated that the essay was "at risk" of failing the task. An ANOVA analysis was then conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences.

3.2. At university: Setting, participants, instruments and data analysis

Phase 2 was set in a large research-intensive university. As noted, of the original group of 173 participants, 117 were successful in gaining entry to university. These 117 ex-pathway students enrolled in various faculties and commenced their first semester of study. By the end of this semester, however, this cohort was further diminished because only 106 students received academic results. In addition to this main cohort, a small sub-set of the 117 entrants – all from the Humanities faculty ($N = 8$) – participated in the focus interviews. This group was suitable for the study in two respects. Firstly, it was representative of the larger cohort in being postgraduate (100%) and mainly Chinese in origin (75%). Secondly, it constituted 62% of the ex-pathway students who entered this faculty. Nevertheless, it needs to be recognized that this group was somewhat atypical of the entire cohort. These students were predominantly female (75%) and enrolled in a faculty which was not one of the major destinations of the ex-pathway students. In addition, they were possibly more confident in written English, given that they chose to study in subjects which require more skill in writing than many other subjects.

To collect data on student perceptions and academic progress, two instruments were employed. For academic progress, the dataset was the semester 2, 2009 grades of the 106 ex-pathway students and the non-pathway students who completed the same subjects. For student perceptions, the focus interview was used. According to Ho (2006), this is an ideal way to let students talk openly about their attitudes to language teaching/learning, typically with open-ended prompts guiding the discussion. The following prompt was used: "Do you think your (pathway) course/s prepared you very well for further study in university?" The group discussions lasted 1 hour.

The data on university grades was obtained, following permission, from the university's grade system. Three focus groups were conducted in Week 10 of the semester, each 1 hour in duration. The prompt was distributed to participants immediately before the session.

The analysis of the university-based data involved two procedures. For the analysis of academic progress, the pathway graduates' grades ($N = 806$) were compared with those of all students enrolled in the same Units ($N = 31,814$) by calculating the number and proportion of students awarded each grade and by undertaking a chi-square test of independence of grades and pathway status. For the focus group data, themes in the data were detected.

In sum, the methodology was longitudinal. The first phase studied the perceptions and writing of 173 students and then focused on the writing of the 117 "Recommended" students. The second phase conducted focus groups with a sub-set of the 117 students who entered university and analyzed the academic results of the 106 who completed the semester.

4. Results

This section presents the results for the data collected at the pathway and then for the data collected at university.

4.1. At the pathway: Student perceptions of preparation

From the analysis of Questions 6 and 7 of the questionnaire, we see that, while still at the ELICOS Centre, the students felt variably confident about their university preparation by the pathway.

Table 2 presents the results for Question 6, the students' rating of ten specific aspects of their pathway courses. Their mean ratings ranged between 3.98 and 3.41 (out of 5). They awarded the highest mean scores (between 3.98 and 3.96) to the more academic and general aspects, namely "the academic skills I need for university", "effective participation in university studies", and "the types of writing needed for university". Their ratings were lower for the more specifically language-related skills, which ranged from 3.80 to 3.41. Within this range, the highest score was given to "I have improved in my English language proficiency" and the lowest to "I have improved in my knowledge of grammar". In rating their confidence in the four language skills, the students rated their confidence in writing last. The students gave the two lowest ratings to: "improvement in the use of grammar" (3.49) and "improvement in the knowledge of grammar" (3.41).

To determine whether there is a difference of average scores between the 10 items listed above, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The ANOVA was significant, $F (9, 1698) = 7.22$, $p < 0.05$. Thus it can be concluded that at least one item in Table 2 has a mean score that is different to the others.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the Question 6 items – mean student ratings of ten statements regarding their preparation for university study by the pathway. Students were asked to rate these statements using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree), with 3 signifying "Don't know".

Questions	*N*	Mean (*SD*)
The pathway has prepared me to participate effectively in my university studies	173	3.86 (0.85)
As a result of my pathway course/s, I feel confident about reading in English at university e.g. reading journal articles	170	3.68 (0.93)
At the pathway I have learned the academic skills I need for university	172	3.98 (0.88)
At the pathway I have learned the types of writing I need for university	166	3.96 (0.90)
At the pathway I have improved in my English language proficiency	172	3.80 (0.90)
At the pathway I have improved in my use of grammar	173	3.49 (0.93)
At the pathway I have improved in my knowledge of grammar	173	3.41 (0.98)
As a result of my pathway course/s, I feel confident about speaking in English at university e.g. giving oral presentations	169	3.66 (1.02)
As a result of my pathway course/s, I feel confident about listening to English at university e.g. listening to lectures	170	3.72 (0.98)
As a result of my pathway course/s, I feel confident about writing in English at university e.g. writing reports and essays	170	3.54 (0.96)

The students' answers to Question 7, which asked them to provide reasons for their responses to Question 6, illustrate why they perceived preparation in academic skills as having been more effective than their preparation in language skills. First, consider some typical responses to the highest rated prompts:

- I have learned the academic skills I need for university: e.g. *They focus on academic skills*.
- I have learned the types of writing I need for university: e.g. *I have mastered how to write an essay with different styles, such as discussion essay and argument essay*.
- The pathway has prepared me to participate effectively in my university studies: e.g. *I learned the basic knowledge related to my major*.

In contrast, notice these typical reasons given for the lowest rated prompts.

- I feel confident about speaking in English at university: e.g. *We didn't have enough opportunities to improve our oral English.*
- I feel confident about writing in English at university: e.g. *I don't know because the writing in (the pathway) is different from course in uni.*
- I have improved in my use of grammar: e.g. *Some factors of my grammar are corrected, but not systematic.*
- I have improved in my knowledge of grammar: e.g. *We did not have grammar classes. I think that should be include.*

To sum up, the results for Questions 6 and 7 revealed that the students felt more confident that they could participate academically in their coming university study than that they could participate linguistically, particularly via the crucial productive skills of speaking and writing. In considering this result, it is important to remember that, due to the anonymity of the questionnaire, it was impossible to isolate the data of the 30% of the participants who completed the questionnaire, but were "Not Recommended" for university because their English language proficiency fell short of the requirements. Hence, the necessary inclusion of the perceptions of these students may well have decreased the overall ratings which the entire cohort gave to language skills. As we turn to the findings for writing in which there was no longer the constraint of anonymity we see evidence, however, that under-preparation in terms of language proficiency was not restricted to the "Not Recommended" group.

4.2. At the pathway: Written proficiency

The analysis of the essays revealed high "at risk" levels in the writing of both the "Recommended" and "Not Recommended" students. Table 3 shows that, from their total scores, 57.7% of the "Not Recommended" and 47.0% of the "Recommended" students were "at risk". A total "at risk" – or Fail – score meant that a student attained 10 or less overall. To recap, each of the four MASUS Areas were rated from 1 to 4 (with 1 signifying "poor" and 4 signifying "excellent"), resulting in a total optimal score of 16. Hence, while more of the "Not Recommended" students were "at risk" than the "Recommended", we can conclude that almost half of the critical 117 participants were "at risk" in their essay writing in a general sense.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the essay scores for the "Recommended" and "Not Recommended" students.

MASUS Areas	Not Recommended students ($N = 52$)		Recommended students ($N = 117$)	
	% (*n*) "at risk" (scores of 1 or 2)	% (*n*) passing (scores of 3 or 4)	% (*n*) "at risk" (scores of 1 or 2)	% (*n*) passing (scores of 3 or 4)
A: Use of sources	55.8 (29)	44.2 (23)	47.0 (55)	53.0 (62)
B: Structure	25.0 (13)	75.0 (39)	33.3 (39)	66.7 (78)
C: Academic style	28.8 (15)	71.2 (37)	29.9 (35)	70.1 (82)
D: Grammar	61.5 (32)	38.5 (20)	40.2 (47)	59.8 (70)
Total	57.7 (30)	42.3 (22)	47.0 (55)	53.0 (62)

Turning to the scores for the four MASUS Areas, we see substantial levels of "at risk" writing across the Areas but the highest levels are visible in A ("Use of source material") and, particularly, D ("Grammatical correctness"). Of particular importance here is that this pattern applied not only to the "Not Recommended" students but also the "Recommended" ones. Thus, of the students who entered university, 47.0% attained scores of 2 or less in "Use of source material" and "Grammatical correctness".

To determine whether there is a significant difference between the "Pass" and "at risk" "Recommended" students in Total and Area (A, B, C, D) scores, a series of independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. Test results are presented in Table 4. In total scores as well as individual area scores, there was a significant difference between the two groups of students.

Table 4. Independent samples *t*-test for individual group scores and total scores for the "Recommended" students' essays.

MASUS Areas		N	Levene's F	M (SD)	df	t
A	Pass	62	0.12	3.06 (0.25)	115	24.12***
	At risk	55		1.93 (0.26)		
B	Pass	78	10.38**	3.18 (0.39)	102.57	18.20***
	At risk	39		1.92 (0.27)		
C	Pass	82	0.40	3.07 (0.26)	115	22.00***
	At risk	35		1.94 (0.24)		
D	Pass	70	12.07**	3.04 (0.20)	68.61	23.38***
	At risk	47		1.87 (0.34)		
Total	Pass	62	0.03	11.94 (1.07)	115	13.84***
	At risk	55		9.07 (1.17)		

Note: $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$

It may be useful to use the descriptors established by the standardization process to illuminate the difficulties in Areas A and D (Gill, 2009).

"At risk" writing in Area A ("Use of source material") meant the following:
- Score of 1: Little or no inclusion of relevant source material. Where present, it was poorly integrated into the text (e.g. via lengthy direct quotations or erroneous paraphrasing). Many students made no attempt to reference.
- Score of 2: Minimal inclusion of relevant source material. Students tended to select the most salient data rather than be guided by the essay question or their own position. Source material was not well integrated and varied as to whether it was referenced.

"At risk" writing in Area D ("Grammatical correctness") meant the following:
- Score of 1: Grammatical errors substantially interfered with the meaning. The students made errors that substantially interfered with the clarity of meaning, to the point where it became difficult to comprehend what the writer was saying. What was significant was not the relative frequency but the types of errors, particularly clause structure, tense choice, verb formation and subject-verb agreement.
- Score of 2: Grammatical errors somewhat obscured the meaning. Clarity was obscured to a lesser degree or only at certain points. This was typically associated with errors in one or two of the areas; for example, clause structure and tense choice but not verb formation and subject-verb agreement. Errors in clause structure could be significant enough to intervene considerably with clarity of meaning.

This focus on Areas A and D is not meant to deny problems in the two other Areas: C ("Academic style") and B ("Structure"). Substantial numbers of "Recommended" students experienced difficulties with both these Areas and even recorded higher proportions of risk here than did their "Not Recommended" colleagues. In terms of "Academic style", "at risk" students' essays displayed no or infrequent awareness of academic writing style, as evidenced by their use of subjective vocabulary and informal language. In terms of "Structure", their essays failed either to develop an argument or to organize information into essay stages. For example, they provided an Introduction but no Conclusion.

In summary, the findings of the questionnaire demonstrate that, while finishing their pathway courses the cohort of students felt that, on arrival at university, they might experience particular difficulties with their language proficiency, especially with their writing and grammar. The essay data revealed difficulties in their writing, particularly in their use of source material and grammatical usage.

4.3. At university: Academic results

To compare how well the 106 "Recommended" students who completed the semester did relative to their peers in Semester 2, 2009, the number and percentage of "Recommended" and "All Other" students receiving each grade (HD, D, CR, P, F & 'Other') in that semester are shown in Table 5. It appears from this table that the "Recommended" students received a lower proportion of High Distinctions, Distinctions Credits and Fails and a higher proportion of Pass and "Other" grades. Two main trends are apparent. Firstly, the pathway students' grades clustered towards the lower end of the grade spectrum more than the grades of all other students in the same subjects, with the exception of Fail and "Other" grades. Secondly, the pathway students received a markedly higher proportion of "Other" grades. Since this category includes withdrawals from subjects, this higher proportion indicates that the pathway students withdrew from more subjects in the early weeks of the semester than their peers. This difference in the distribution of grades was shown to be statistically significant using a chi-square test of independence, $\chi^2_{5,.05} = 454.30$, $p < .001$.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics on the number of each university grade the "Recommended" students and their peers received in Semester 2, 2009.

Grades	Recommended	All other students
	n (% in cohort)	n (% in cohort)
High Distinction	12 (2.43)	1652 (5.27)
Distinction	58 (11.76)	6412 (20.47)
Credit	153 (31.03)	10518 (33.58)
Pass	163 (33.06)	10077 (32.17)
Fail	26 (5.27)	2001 (6.39)
Other	81 (16.43)	661 (2.11)
Total	493	31,321

4.4. At university: Focus interviews

The focus interviews with the eight Humanities students towards the end of the students' first university semester reflected the findings of the questionnaire. In discussing whether their pathway course/s prepared them very well for study in university, the students confirmed that they felt better prepared in terms of general and academic skills than language proficiency skills.

One major theme in the discussions was a sense of familiarity with the Australian university environment, including its valued skills. One student summed up this view as follows:

> *I think it is very good to spend some time here before you join the university. You've got more preparation. You can know all the cultural differences.*

Another student specified the importance of the pathway's focus on skills required by the university:

> *Yeah, we did the tutorial and the group presentation and so it helped me when we entered our major we had to do the tutorial presentation like this.*

Nevertheless, according to the students, some skills, such as critical thinking, could have been better developed.

The other major theme was that language skills were developed too superficially for the demands of university. While the students praised the efforts of their teachers to develop their language skills and grammar, they mentioned a range of difficulties in these areas:

> *They don't prepare you for the length of university written assessments, like essays.*

> *When I first went to the lecture I didn't understand at all ... listening to the tape and listening to the actual lecture from professors is different; actually, participating in discussion was the hardest part for me.*

> *They don't specifically taught the grammar used.*

To summarize, the results on the three measures revealed that the students felt better prepared academically than linguistically, exhibited difficulties in approximately 50% of the essays but – except in terms of subject withdrawals – did not attain significantly different mean grade scores to their peers.

5. Discussion

This substantial case study of a large international postgraduate cohort adds to previous scholarship on onshore pathways by suggesting that universities should monitor pathways via broad datasets which include key language-related indicators of participation, particularly written proficiency. By discussing the findings for student perceptions, written proficiency, and academic grades, this section indicates that these findings pinpoint broader trends than this single case.

The results of the questionnaire and focus groups imply that universities could enrich their profile of English language competence via measures of student perceptions. The finding that students felt more competent in general/academic than language skills gains some confirmation from studies showing that onshore students feel better prepared than offshore students for local requirements (Floyd, 2011) and that international students feel insecure about their language skills (Snow Andrade, 2006; Baird, 2010). Since this trend was found not only pre- but also post-entry, the study extends Woodrow et al.'s (2011) interview result that ex-pathway students experience a range of problems at university. The present study shows, furthermore, that language-oriented measures of student perception can specify areas of perceived strengths and weaknesses. For example, the finding that the students felt significantly more confident that "I have learned the academic skills I need for university" than that "I have improved in my use/knowledge of grammar" pinpoints the students' feeling of relative under-preparedness in terms of grammatical knowledge and skills. This result provides one piece of evidence, therefore, that onshore pathways should reconsider their approach to the teaching of grammar. It also implies that a rethinking is required of the definition of proficiency which underpins these pathways' current approach to formal grammar:

> ... the ability of students to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies. ... This view ... distinguishes the use of English language proficiency from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure. (AUQA, 2009, p. 1)

While the study's findings provide rare and valuable glimpses of the students' perceptions of their preparedness for university, they should be taken as provisional since the anonymity of the questionnaire data made it impossible to separate out the crucial "Recommended" group, and because the scope of the study only permitted a small focus group sample which could not be fully representative of faculty destinations.

Since vital diagnostic information on whether students were "sufficiently competent in the English language" (TEQSA, 2011, p. 15) emerged from the essay findings, universities would be well advised to use a PELA with onshore pathway cohorts. The findings for the "Recommended" students revealed high levels "risk", especially in Areas A ("Use of sources") and D ("Grammatical correctness"). While breaking new ground in onshore pathway studies by considering students' writing, the results concur with other research on university writing. Bretag (2007), in a study of academics' views of university plagiarism policies, argued that the appropriate use of source material was a major difficulty for international students due to limited English language skills. Furthermore, by employing the MASUS criteria to assess the writing of Pharmacy students, Scouller et al. (2008) found that students for whom English was a second language had significantly lower Area D (grammar) scores. Indeed, the current study's finding of a high level of "at risk" writing in Area D lends weight to the point made above that onshore pathway curricula and the policies which guide them should have a more inclusive approach to formal grammar. The results imply that, despite the centrality of academic writing to university success (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007), "at risk" writing was not detected by the pathway's in-house test/assessment procedure. Referring to the plethora of such entry measures, Dunworth (2010, p. 7) argues that universities need "a more sophisticated understanding of how we measure entry level language proficiency and student capacity for language development". PELAs can help provide such sophistication and MASUS is a good candidate due to its validity, reliability and utility (Holder, Jones, Robinson, & Krass, 1999). However, to best capture whether ex-pathway students are prepared for university participation in writing – as well as other language – skills, further research should include the following features:

- A PELA which would establish whether or not written proficiency had developed over the semester;
- As part of this PELA, a comparison of markers experienced and inexperienced in academic literacy and of pathway and non-pathway students, which would identify whether tutors mark for academic literacy or other criteria and whether they mark pathway students differently to non-pathway students;
- An analysis of target genres, which would ensure that the most suitable genre was selected e.g. the essay may not be the most suitable for Business students;
- An assessment of the other language skills which would enable comparison between writing and other skills.

The findings for academic grades indicate that universities should routinely monitor onshore pathway students' academic performance. By showing that the pathway students' grades tended to be lower than their peers' grades and that there was a statistically significant relationship between their pathway status and academic grades, the results indicate that English language skills negatively affected academic achievement. The current study, therefore, augments other evidence that weak English language skills impact upon academic success (Bretag, 2007; McGowan & Potter, 2008). Specifically, it corroborates Oliver et al.'s (2012) finding that ex-onshore pathway students experienced academic difficulties at university and shows that academic results can be affected by IELTS scores above those in that former study. In the present study, the average IELTS score was 7.1, whereas in Oliver et al. (2012) the scores were 6.65 (for the undergraduates) and 6.79 (for the postgraduates): In monitoring grades, the results extend previous studies which have employed aggregate scores and not compared pathway students to their peers (Woodrow et al., 2011; Oliver et al., 2012). Thus, the academic results suggest that, although academic achievement is not a sufficient metric of competence in the English language, lower than expected grades suggest that the Australian university graduate attribute of "high level communication skills" has not been met. It should be added that the higher proportion of "Other" grades is also cause for concern because it indicates that pathway

students are not completing subjects, either because they had insufficient information or felt ill-equipped to succeed. These findings carries the message that, if students enter universities on low to medial IELTS scores, universities should increase the embedding of language/literacy in the disciplines and additional language/literacy support so that onshore pathway students can achieve comparable grades to their peers.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate that the students were "sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in the course of study and achieve its expected learning outcomes" (TEQSA 2011, p. 15). The overall cohort was generally satisfied with their linguistic and academic pathway preparation, over half of the "Recommended" demonstrated above risk writing, and 78% of this group's grades were Pass or higher. However, the overall cohort felt less prepared in language than in academic skills, the "Recommended" students showed high levels of "risk" in their writing and this group did not achieve academically on par with their peers, suggesting that weak English skills held them back to a certain extent. In showing this, this study contributes to theory and policy on the education of international students. Theoretically, the study adds to the debate about the education of international students by drawing new attention to difficulties with English language competence/proficiency. Reflecting a recent tendency, Benzie (2011) maintains that the debate should shift away from the "deficit" view inherent in proficiency-based studies (e.g. Birrell, 2006) since they focus on students' shortcomings rather than strategies to assist students. Although this argument rightly emphasizes the importance of a positive approach, it ignores the need to identify language difficulties which may curtail the students' ability to participate effectively in university. While underscoring the value of such information, this study aims to avoid a "deficit" approach. In relation to language, the study takes the vital step of identifying components of English language competence requiring particular attention, namely writing as a skill and, within this skill, the use of sources and grammar. In relation to academic achievement, the study identifies the tendency of the pathway students' grades to cluster at the lower end of the range. The study recognizes that since the data collection in 2009, many changes have occurred in onshore pathways, including in curriculum (Brandon, 2012). Although it remains to be seen whether substantial improvements have taken place, ongoing evidence of problems since then (e.g. Baird, 2010) suggests the need for continued vigilance in terms of English proficiency entry levels, particularly as postgraduate (including international student) numbers rise. From a policy perspective, the study joins other research (e.g. Oliver et al., 2012) in underscoring the need for more systematic monitoring of onshore pathway students' university participation. Some may argue that, since the non-test route has exhibited the problems, testing should be mandatory for onshore entrants. While this remains an option, the present study suggests that monitoring of pathways via PELA could be a complementary or alternative measure and that this monitoring should articulate into adequate language and writing support for students, particularly those identified as "at risk". Hence, from theoretical and policy perspectives, the study implies that the scrutiny of entry levels should be maintained via the expanded monitoring of onshore pathways on key measures of participation, particularly writing.

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