

# Perceptions and Decision-Making: The Usefulness of the English for Academic Purposes Program for Foundation Year International Students

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## Abstract

*This Nuts and Bolts paper discusses some international student perceptions about the level of satisfaction with their learning experience, both in foundation studies and at university. An exploration is presented from the perspectives of former students from the foundation program at Trinity College Foundation Studies (TCFS), Melbourne. One key theme is the perceived usefulness of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in how well this compulsory foundation studies' subject assisted aspirations to attend the University of Melbourne. The second theme is how TCFS could further assist their academic decision-making. The findings presented address the reflections of learners who achieved entry to the University of Melbourne.*

## Background to Development

Since 1989, TCFS has been a preparatory pathway for talented overseas students seeking entry to the University of Melbourne and other tertiary institutions. As part of an on-going process of determining these cohorts' needs, surveys have been conducted in 2003, 2007 and 2010. In all these surveys, alumni were asked to rate the usefulness of ten elements of their English for Academic Purposes at TCFS in relation to their university studies. A Likert-type scale was used to encourage a wide range of discrimination and more precision in student opinions. The rating scale is set up in the following way: 1 – Not useful, 2 – Occasionally useful, 3 – Useful, 4 – Very useful, 5 – Essential to tertiary studies. In the 2010 survey, additional questions elicited feedback on subject choices. Students were asked to rank order the main reasons why they chose specific electives in foundation studies and why they chose their specific University of Melbourne faculty/degree course. Comments were invited on whether or not they would still make those same selections.

It is important to note that these perceptions include respondents who have completed at least one semester of their tertiary degree. Moreover, the extensive changes to course structure with the implementation of the Melbourne Model make this an important area to investigate in terms of the ongoing choices these students have to make about their subjects. In terms of disciplinary depth, a student is required to attain ‘detailed knowledge in at least one specific discipline, gained through a coherent progression of subjects from first through to third year.’ In addition, students must choose 25% of their subjects outside of this core discipline (<http://uninews.unimelb.edu.au/news/4155/>).

### **Importance of student perceptions in shaping change**

The question was posed as to whether or not the current TCFS EAP course was meeting the academic needs of its international students, in terms of succeeding at university and making informed choices. Moreover, what did the students themselves perceive as to what changes were necessary.

There has been limited research on the issue of student perceptions about the applicability of elements of Foundation Study Programs’ (FSP) EAP courses to success at university. There are several reasons for this. First, much research has focused on teacher expectations for students. This is especially true for the research done outside Australia, i.e. in the US, the UK and Hong Kong. Secondly, research done in countries that have different international student configurations and/or university systems makes it less relevant to the Australian situation addressed in this thesis. Thirdly, different faculties may require different language skills and/or in different proportions. Therefore, while these studies are certainly important, they do not focus on the opinions of students from specific countries (Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong) who are enrolled in specific faculties (Economics and Commerce, Engineering, Science and Arts) in an Australian university, who have completed an EAP program covering the four macroskills - reading, writing, speaking and listening - and, through their university experience, can now assess the effectiveness of these.

While much of the research has focused on what educators feel is most important for success in their courses, some researchers have embraced the idea that students should be asked their opinion. Indeed, Ferris’s (1998, pp. 307, 312) study found that faculty and students disagreed on their perceptions of course requirements and the problem areas the students might have in 16 of 20 items she surveyed. She concluded that instructors may not be the best judges of what their students are struggling with and why. She concludes that, “students are the best sources of information about the problems they experience”. This is why student perceptions are the focus of the research.

### **Analysis**

The on-line 2010 survey to be administered in March focuses on the following elements from EAP: essay structure, paragraph structure, paraphrasing, argumentation, academic writing style, bibliography and referencing, listening, note taking, reading and oral presentation skills. The respondents were asked to rate each of these as to its importance for university studies. These ten elements were divided

into the following macro-skills areas: writing (questions 1 to 6), listening (questions 7 and 8) reading (question 9) and speaking, (question 10). Then the results of the degrees/faculties with the most respondents and the full survey cohort collated. This allows for comparison – by averages and proportions – of the four macro-skills between the academic faculties and with the full survey cohort. The data were then analysed by a comparison of average scores for each of the ten elements and then a proportional analysis of each conducted. The latter enables comparison of the percentage of the respondents who feel the particular element was ‘very useful’ and ‘essential’ with those that feel the element was ‘not useful’ and ‘not needed at all’.

In terms of career choices, Krause (2009) understands the importance of looking beyond the initial transition hurdle of getting into an Australian university and to move on to enhancing the overall tertiary engagement process. Of the multiple ways this engagement can be defined, her recommendations for career mapping and curricula which involve learners, are key drivers for this research, too, given that some international students may view university as something of a battle ground. Holt (2007), for her part, identifies the need to know more about what the transition experience is like for the individual, not just have the statistical data on a specific cohort. A comparative study by Singaravelu, White and Bringaze (2005) frame this engagement for specific international students in America as being more likely when decision-making about career choice is certain. These findings are of relevance to the transition within a changing curricula and degree structure at the University of Melbourne.

### **Findings and format of presentation**

The findings from the survey will be collated in April 2010. The predicted areas of interest to report on will be structured under the following PowerPoint presentations with handouts and discussion:

Presentation (10 minutes)

1. Usefulness of EAP in preparing international students at university.
2. Key reasons for choosing electives at TCFS and if any changes would be made now.
3. Key reasons for choosing current tertiary degree/faculty and if any changes would be made now.

Discussion (20 minutes)

Based on the above findings, there will be an open discussion on the following:

- *How EAP can assist student achievement (10 minutes)*
- *How access to informed subject choices can be improved (10 minutes)*

Method of Collating Ideas

Points made will be listed on a whiteboard to focus discussion and record suggestions for future consideration.

This knowledge-sharing will highlight how human resources can be brought together to influence informed curriculum renewal.

### **Key conference themes addressed in this nuts and bolts presentation**

- Accommodating diversity through curriculum and co-curricular activities
- Exemplar and innovative practices to support first year students
- Managing expectations-reality mismatch

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