

Introduction

In an era of globalisation and ever-increasing student mobility, there are few people working in higher education today, whether as managers, academics or administrators, who are unaware of the increasing prominence of English language as a key – many would say contentious – issue in the sector. The number of English-medium universities, where all or part of the curriculum is delivered via the medium of English, is growing as institutions try to acquire a share of what is now the global enterprise of education. Significantly, these institutions are no longer confined primarily to those countries where English is used as the native tongue – what Kachru (1985) referred to as the ‘inner circle’ countries, in his frequently cited Concentric Circles model. Increasingly, universities worldwide are looking at the possibility of offering programmes or modules in English in an effort to attract international students, ensure their long-term viability and enhance their reputations as global institutions with an international outlook and the ability to produce graduates who are equipped to meet the expectations of employers in what is a changing, increasingly multi-cultural workplace, where communication skills are regarded as more important than ever.

Clearly, the efforts of these universities are being rewarded, as evidenced by the unprecedented level of student mobility and the accompanying growth in international student numbers being experienced across the sector. For many international students, the benefits of studying for a degree in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia are considerable, and include the cachet that comes with acquiring a degree from a reputable overseas institution, along with the prospect of better employment conditions and opportunities in their countries of origin as a result of having developed a good level of English language competence during the course of their studies. However, while this influx of international students promises to benefit universities and the students they enrol, it comes with significant ramifications for all stakeholders – the university as an institution, academic staff, and the students themselves and their families – and it raises some complex but fundamental issues, many of which bear on a tension between business imperatives and the need to uphold educational standards. How universities reconcile that tension is critical, for it calls

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into question the extent to which their decisions are guided by a moral compass, and has the potential to alter fundamentally not just the institutions concerned but also the very nature of higher education.

One key issue with which institutions need to grapple is that of English language entry standards and how to set realistic and reasonable thresholds which ensure, so far as is possible, that there is a reasonable prospect of students being able not merely to cope with and survive the university experience but to fully integrate and flourish, both academically and socially. Failure to set standards appropriately is likely to mean that students who have paid handsomely for an overseas university education will have an unfulfilling learning experience and feel anxious and isolated, with the result that a proportion will inevitably drop out, only to return to their countries of origin with a sense of failure at having not lived up to their own, their families' and their friends' expectations. For their part, academic staff are likely to face the frustrating and demanding task of having to adjust syllabi and the pedagogy through which they are delivered in order to accommodate students with weak language skills, but without compromising the essential integrity of their courses or the degree programmes of which they are a part. Some would argue that there is an inherent and irreconcilable tension here.

Failure to set entry standards correctly and to find an appropriate balance between accommodating students with weak language skills and maintaining curriculum standards has potentially important reputational consequences for graduating universities, both in terms of the quality of their degrees and of the student experience. This in turn has implications for the employability of their graduating students and for future recruitment. Furthermore, Student Services departments are likely to find themselves having to deal with increasing numbers of students suffering stress-related illnesses, while those units responsible for developing students' English language skills will come under pressure from a growing demand for their services and the attendant implications for resources and budgets.

English language development opportunities have, perhaps unsurprisingly, taken on greater significance and visibility in recent years largely as a result of the rapid growth in international student numbers, but also in response to other factors such as attempts to widen participation in higher education. How to accommodate students who need additional English language development has become a prominent and, for many, difficult and contentious issue, and its emergence suggests, among other things, that gatekeeping tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are either not, in and of themselves, fit for purpose and/or are not being used appropriately – which again raises ethical questions as well as questions concerning the levels of assessment literacy of those responsible for setting English language entry standards. The only possible alternative interpretation is that, while it is common practice for universities to benchmark

against competitor institutions in respect of English language entry requirements, these are typically set at the minimal levels of competence deemed necessary to cope with university study. That is, universities will often choose to admit students on the basis of strategically setting entry requirements on the understanding that a proportion of the students they accept will need to develop their language proficiency during the course of their studies. Where this is the case, there is surely a moral imperative not only to inform those students of the need for ongoing language development post-entry but also to ensure that adequate provisions are available to them, designed to address that need. Of course, the intended language development may not necessarily happen – or happen to the required extent – due to individual differences in learners’ aptitude and/or application or to the nature and extent of those language support services and resources to which students have access.

The reality is that the rigour with which universities set their entry criteria, the minimum proficiency levels they stipulate and, particularly, the extent and quality of English language provision that they offer, can be highly variable. Where universities are coming up short they are certainly not serving their students well; neither are they, ultimately, serving their own interests and those of their staff.

It is against this background, and in light of the accompanying sense of unease felt by many working in higher education, that there has, in recent years, been a growing sense in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia that more robust regulation of English language standards and provision is needed; indeed, there have already been moves in this direction. What is clear is that if universities are to respond effectively to such regulation and ensure that they are ‘doing right’ by their students, they will have to consider and produce creative and informed responses to an array of complex issues and challenges:

- What is English language ‘proficiency’, and how – if at all – does it relate to domestic as well as international students for whom English is not a first language?
- Is pre-enrolment assessment serving its purpose sufficiently well or not, and if not, how might any shortcomings be rectified or at least compensated for?
- Should some form of post-enrolment assessment of English language competence be implemented, and, if so, what might be the benefits and threats associated with such a policy?
- What are the possible permutations for how a conceptualisation of proficiency might be implemented in terms of a model of English language provision, and how might such a model be resourced?
- And how can the different elements of an English language strategy work together in an integrated fashion so as to help ensure a positive and productive student experience?

Critically, as I have already intimated, the issue of English language standards in higher education is highly political as well as strategic in nature, for, rightly or

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wrongly, it has become inextricably linked to the fortunes of universities and ultimately, in many cases, their continued viability. The way in which institutions set their English language standards, the way in which they assess students' English language skills pre- and post-enrolment, the nature of the English language provision they offer, and the way in which they publicise and present these activities both internally and – especially – to the outside world, all serve to position them in a certain way. They say something about their brands in an era where brand image is a factor that necessarily infiltrates almost everything they do; one that is an increasingly important determinant of their survival and success in what has become a highly competitive, even cut-throat higher education marketplace where every university is vying for market share. And, again, this fact highlights a growing tension that inevitably manifests itself in managerial decision-making between actions that promise to provide competitive advantage on the one hand and, on the other, those that place sound pedagogy and the students' interests centre-stage. Furthermore, the way in which the sector as a whole reconciles this tension has wide-reaching ramifications for the broader national economic interest, for it will influence the choices made by students seeking an overseas study experience in an English-speaking environment.

This purpose of this book is to unpack these and related issues, although not with the intention of offering a set of definitive answers or an 'ideal' model. To do so would be both presumptuous and unrealistic, not least because, while there may be general principles and broad standards that need to apply irrespective of circumstances, institutional contexts inevitably vary, and what may be a reasonable and effective response in one context may not necessarily be so in another. Instead, what I seek to do in this book is to frame what I shall call the 'English language question' and to identify and deconstruct key issues in the hope that this process will both generate and inform institutional discussions as universities strive to conceptualise and implement effective change in a way that ensures they better serve the English language needs of their students. It bears repeating that, while the book highlights some of the quite considerable challenges universities face in dealing with a rapidly changing student demographic, it is important to temper this perspective with recognition that this diversity brings with it important opportunities as well, not least in enriching students' experience through more inclusive curricula and intercultural interactions that develop in them important skills that they will require post-graduation. The fact is that the changing demographic of universities is very much a reflection of change in society more generally, and by equipping students with the skills they need to operate effectively and comfortably in multicultural contexts, universities are helping ensure their future success, and this is no more true than in the world of work. It has become axiomatic that employers today particularly value well-developed communication and intercultural skills in their employees.

Although it is beyond the scope of this book, one issue which nonetheless warrants passing mention at least, by virtue of the fact that it is increasingly making itself felt across the higher education sector and concerns the issue of English language standards, is that of the English language competence of academic teaching staff: in particular, those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. While academics whose first language is not English have always been a part of the higher education landscape, the globalisation of education and universities' attempts to internationalise have meant that they have become a more prominent feature of this landscape. This of course can bring with it great benefits; however, student satisfaction surveys and anecdotal evidence suggest that, where academics' English language competence – and indeed intercultural competence – is such that they are difficult to understand and to interact with, this can have a negative impact on learning and leave students dissatisfied with part or much of their educational experience and with a jaundiced view of their graduating universities.

The chapters

The book begins by looking, in Chapter 1, at some of the key issues currently affecting higher education. I suggest that, despite not necessarily always being immediately evident, English language proficiency is nonetheless a common denominator. In light of its increased significance and thus prominence, and the variation that exists in the way universities account for it in terms of their entry standards, their post-entry measures for identifying those at greatest risk linguistically, and the nature of English language development provision they have in place, Chapter 2 considers the case for greater regulation of English language provision in universities and describes some recent initiatives designed to provide such regulation, or at least guidance on best practice. Chapter 3 analyses the notion of language proficiency and argues that a clear conceptualisation of the concept is a necessary prerequisite to the shaping of any well-informed, coherent institutional strategy for addressing the English language question as well as to meeting any regulatory requirements. The fact that a proportion of students who enrol in English-medium universities subsequently struggle to cope with the language demands of university level work, sometimes to the extent that they discontinue their studies, suggests that something is awry with the pre-entry processes, instruments and/or the way in which they are applied and used respectively by universities, and it is this that forms the focus of Chapter 4. Chapter 5, in contrast, looks at what can be done post-entry in terms of assessing students' language competence. In particular, it considers some of the pros and cons of post-enrolment language assessment (PELA) in general, as well as of some possible models of PELA and the logistical and other issues they present. Drawing very much on the

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conceptualisation of language proficiency articulated in Chapter 3, Chapter 6 reflects on its implications for the delivery of language development and for the centralised and decentralised models by which language services are provided in the higher education context. A particular focus of the chapter is on the embedding of academic literacies in the curriculum. Chapter 7 looks at the practicalities of implanting change of the kind implied in the preceding chapters. Among other things, it considers such factors as the institutional context and political climate, the personality, astuteness and awareness of those leading change, the implications for technology and professional development, the criticality of good communication channels and regular dissemination of information and progress towards waypoints, and the importance of evaluating innovation post-implementation. Finally, by presenting an institutional case study located in the Australian higher education context, in Chapter 8 I seek to offer some insights into how many of the principles and ideas discussed in the forgoing chapters might be realised and how, in attempting to implement any change – and, especially, large-scale institutional change – there can be considerable divergence between ideas in principle and ideas in practice. As such, innovators need to manifest two particularly crucial qualities: the ability to anticipate and the capacity to respond deftly to unexpected challenges as and when they arise.

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1 The ‘English language question’ in the context of the changing face of higher education

1.1 Introduction

Few would dispute that the nature of higher education has changed significantly over the course of the past five decades. The pace of that change has accelerated notably in the last fifteen to twenty years such that those working in the sector – and in academic faculties in particular – often feel that no sooner has the implementation of one policy begun to bed down and a sense of routine, rhythm and stability in their working practices returned, than yet another initiative is forthcoming, flowing from which are directives requiring further change, and sometimes even a complete reversal of previous policy and practice. Whether driven by government agendas or ideological shifts within education generally or the institution itself (or indeed both), and whether or not it is desirable and educationally or morally justified, this continual state of flux can be a source of frustration for those at the coalface who are often left feeling as though they never fully manage to implement one directive before they have to respond to a new one. Moreover, it can undermine innovation by engendering feelings of disorientation, cynicism and a general scepticism about the intellectual rigour and integrity underlying policy change. Further, it can lead to a reluctance by academic staff, and indeed administrators, to engage with new initiatives in the near-knowledge that, regardless of how potentially worthwhile they may be, and no matter how praiseworthy the motives driving them, they are unlikely to reach a state of maturity that will ensure the kind and degree of change envisioned by their architects.

Be this as it may, change is, and looks likely to remain, very much part and parcel of higher education as universities position themselves and attempt to respond adroitly to a fast-changing political, educational and social landscape at a time of great economic uncertainty. More than ever, they need to adopt a highly pragmatic stance on policy and practice if, in the face of such change, they are to deliver education of the highest quality while remaining competitive and financially buoyant. As I hope to demonstrate in the pages that follow, while they are certainly not mutually exclusive, efforts to achieve an acceptable balance between the maintenance of educational standards and continued

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viability as institutions of higher education can, nonetheless, present universities with major ethical quandaries in the face of which the decisions they ultimately make can have far-reaching implications.

1.2 Key drivers of change in higher education

1.2.1 *The social justice agenda*

A number of key and largely interrelated developments can be identified as relatively recent and important drivers of change within the higher education sector. One such development is what is sometimes referred to as the social justice agenda, to which governments, particularly in Western, economically developed nations (but increasingly elsewhere), have given growing prominence in terms of policy and strategy. This agenda has sought to increase, through so-called 'widening participation' initiatives (e.g. AimHigher (2004–2011) and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) in the United Kingdom; TRIO in the United States; and the government response to the Bradley Review in Australia), that proportion of the population who hold a higher education qualification, by striving to ensure greater access for groups that are traditionally underrepresented in the sector; in particular, those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth and who typically fall within the low-SES (social and economic status) category, defined variously in different constituencies.

Efforts to engage this sector of the population have been reflected in multifarious initiatives, including the setting by governments of targets specifying that percentage of the population whom it is intended should gain entry to university and/or who should hold a higher education qualification by a given date; and the encouraging of universities to set quotas on the number of students they enrol who originate from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds and/or who apply from state (comprehensive) schools as opposed to those independent private and grammar schools that are seen by many as the domain of the economically and socially privileged. In the United Kingdom, these targets have been linked to funding and, following substantial university fee increases in 2012, universities are now required to have in place an 'Access Agreement', approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), in order to be able to charge students higher tuition fees; that is, fees above the 'basic level' of £6000, up to a maximum of £9000 (OFFA, 2013). In response to government targets, social and educational institutions and organisations have invested time and money in developing community-focused outreach programmes designed to raise the awareness and aspirations of disadvantaged and non-traditional groups; in pathway programmes – variously referred to as 'access' or 'enabling' programmes and designed to provide a means via

1.2 Key drivers of change in higher education

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which individuals can transition effectively into higher education, or at least get a sense of whether or not higher education is for them; and in schemes offering bursaries and other forms of financial support for the socio-economically disadvantaged. Although the existence of and commitment to such initiatives varies from country to country (see, for example, Mortensen, 2013; Merisotis, 2013; Scott, 2013), nonetheless the widening participation movement has contributed to the ‘massification’ of higher education (Stuart, 2002) and to the changing demographic make-up of universities such that, according to Calderon (2012), the number of students enrolled in higher education by 2030 is forecast to rise from 99.4 million in 2000 to 414.2 million in 2030 – an increase of 314%. Within the United Kingdom, the participation target of 50% of school-leavers entering higher education by 2010, set by Tony Blair’s Labour Government, was almost reached in the 2011–12 academic year, according to statistics published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, with 49.3% of young people entering higher education. While this figure may have been ‘artificially driven up by the decision of thousands of school-leavers to go straight on to higher or further education, rather than defer their entry by a year or more, in order to beat the increase in tuition fees from £3,290 to a maximum of £9,000 a year from 2012–13’ (Adams, 2013, online), nevertheless it is indicative of a continued significant rise in participation from 4% in the early 1960s and 20% in the 1980s (Klinger and Murray, 2012). In Australia, the 2008 Bradley Review recommended higher participation targets of 40% of 25- to 34-year-olds attaining a bachelor-level or higher qualification by 2020 (roughly equivalent to a 50% school-leaver participation rate), with low-SES students comprising 20% of all commencing enrolments by 2025 (Bradley, 2008). In the United States, while financial and other incentives have been put in place by the Obama government in order to increase participation and thus social mobility, there have been no specific targets set other than to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the year 2020 (White House Briefing, 2009). With this in mind, it has been estimated that approximately 60% of Americans will have to earn college degrees and certificates by that time if the country is to regain its international lead. This is an indication at least of the American government’s ambitions, given that the present figure is 40% (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012).

The moral imperative driving the widening participation agenda conveniently intersects with the socio-economic motivations of governments seeking to increase human capital in what is now widely referred to as the global knowledge economy (Cooper, 2010). That is, where governments succeed in raising levels of participation in higher education, it is hoped and expected that a better educated, more skilled workforce will enable their respective countries to better participate and compete economically.

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1.2.2 *New technologies*

New technologies have also had a major impact on education generally, and higher education in particular, and they have rapidly and radically altered the way students learn and teachers teach. Particularly in developed countries, the kind of traditional teacher-fronted, highly structured classrooms that are physically and temporally restrictive are giving way, in part, to increasingly sophisticated and creative electronic forms of learning that are liberating learners and altering their preconceptions, and thus expectations, of what the higher education experience means and what is possible in terms of access to higher education learning opportunities and their personal and professional development. Dedicated online or blended learning increasingly features in universities' course offerings, and distance programmes delivered via online modules and virtual classrooms are rapidly growing in popularity as audio–visual applications such as Skype and Adobe Connect reduce the constraints traditionally associated with studying at distance. As universities endeavour to extend their global reach and compete for market share, it is incumbent on them to move with the times and offer these alternative modes of delivery if they are to meet the expectations of new generations of students and not risk getting left behind in what has become a global marketplace.

The increasingly commercial dimension to higher education, which has been driven in part by its globalisation, is reflected in strategic decision-making by university senior management that increasingly places importance on market research, benchmarking, student satisfaction surveys and 'the student experience'. Today, those same technologies that can broaden the learning experience also drive the higher education sector to be more data-driven than at any time in its history, and having a handle on relevant and reliable metrics and intelligence on their own and competitor institutions can give universities a critical edge by enabling them to shape their brands and their programmes (and their delivery) in ways that are unique, offering added value to the student and positioning them as being at the vanguard of educational development and excellence. The effective integration of new technologies that enhance learning and opportunities for learning is a key element of these efforts to enhance institutional reputation, ranking and thus appeal.

1.2.3 *Globalisation*

Then there is globalisation itself, a phenomenon that is largely a product of technological developments and a catalyst driving universities' attempts to 'internationalise'. In an increasingly interconnected world, where air travel is now affordable for the masses and where information and communication technologies have rendered physical distance almost irrelevant