THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN POSTGRADUATE BUSINESS PROGRAMS AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of 1,597 graduates from postgraduate business programs with a high international student enrolment at an Australian university was undertaken to determine whether students required to complete remedial English language training prior to commencing their master's degree performed at the same academic level as students with acceptable English proficiency. It is found that English proficient students achieved significantly higher academic grades than those required to take remedial English. It is also found that academic performance is significantly negatively related to the length of the remedial English program. A multivariate model provides evidence that postgraduate students' performance is associated with their level of English proficiency and world region of origin, with a business background not being significantly related to performance in a postgraduate business degree.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, international students have dominated enrolments in business programs at many Australian universities. The admission of international students raises issues concerning language proficiency. It seems obvious that proficiency in the language of instruction is essential to successful completion of a degree. However, Australian universities differ on the level of proficiency required with each university able to set its own language proficiency benchmarks. There is no doubt that market forces are at play in the admission of international students. Some universities seem willing to reduce language proficiency requirements in the expectation of achieving a greater market share.

An extensive body of research literature exists that examines the determinants of academic performance in universities. The literature is in three streams. First, there are studies which empirically examine the predictive ability of entrance tests, such as the ability of a GMAT score to predict performance in an MBA program [4]. A second stream of literature comes from psychology and examines the effect personality characteristics have on academic performance, such as goal orientation and self-regulatory processes [1]. A third research stream examines the effect on academic performance of demographic attributes, such as age and gender [6]. This current research is most closely aligned with the demographic group of studies as variables of interest here include language proficiency, world region of origin and academic preparation as possible predictors of academic performance.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND GPA

The sample consists of all 1,597 graduates from the Master of Commerce (MCom) and Master of International Business (MIB) programs at an Australian university ("the University") for the period 2004 to 2006. 82% of this sample are international students. The exit GPA (scale 0 to 4) from the MCom and MIB programs was recorded for each graduating student. The sample was split into those who met the University's standard of English proficiency at the time of initial enrolment and those who were first required to complete a remedial English language program.

Table 1: English Proficiency - Tests for Difference in Mean GPAs

	n	Mean	Med	Min	Max	Std dev	t	p
English proficient	1193	2.94	3.00	1.00	4.00	0.607	8.849	<0.001
English required	404	2.65	2.63	1.44	3.88	0.532		

The mean GPA of the 1,193 English proficient students is significantly greater than the 404 students who completed a remedial English language program ($p <0.001$; Table 1). In an ideal world, we would expect that students in a postgraduate degree who were first required to take remedial English would leave the English program with language proficiency that enabled them to achieve an academic standard commensurate with their peers whose language skills were deemed sufficient at initial enrolment. That is, from postgraduate commencement, students would compete on academic ability alone. However, the results show that students who do not meet language admission standards and complete a remedial English program remain at a disadvantage in their postgraduate business program.

LENGTH OF ENGLISH PROGRAM

If a student accepted into a postgraduate degree does not meet the English proficiency requirement prior to course enrolment, the University will offer a place in an English program conducted by an affiliated or accredited language training provider. The remedial English language programs are normally from 10 to 30 weeks. Successful completion of the English program, as certified by the provider, is all that is required to complete enrolment into the postgraduate degree. Again, in an ideal world, we would expect to find that students are assigned to the correct English language program and the proficiency of each student is brought up to the accepted minimum proficiency level. Therefore, students who completed English programs of different lengths would be competing for grades in the postgraduate program on academic ability alone and not advantaged (or disadvantaged) by superior (or weaker) English skills. This suggests that we would not expect to find any significant association between the number of weeks of English training required of each student and the GPA achieved in their postgraduate degree.

Table 2: Relationship Between GPA and Weeks of English - OLS Regression

	Coeff (B)	t	p	Adj R^2	n
Remedial English students	-0.015	-3.438	<0.001	0.026	404

A regression analysis for the 2004-06 sample of 404 students required to undertake remedial English shows that the length of the English program is significantly negatively related to GPA ($p < 0.001$; Table 2). That is, those students who take longer English language programs prior to enrolment in their postgraduate business program achieve significantly lower GPA scores. Students with the weakest English are placed by the University in the longest English programs. However, students in the longest programs have the lowest GPA outcomes, so the longer programs are not improving English skills to the extent that students are able to commence their postgraduate programs on equal terms with those who initially had higher language proficiency levels. Furthermore, all graduates from the remedial English program, irrespective of the number of weeks, under-perform academically relative to those with accepted English proficiency at the time of enrolment in the postgraduate degrees. Consequently, concerns exist about the effectiveness of remedial English programs.

MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

To further analyze the extent to which English proficiency is associated with academic performance, a multivariate model was tested where GPA is the dependent variable and the independent variables are English proficiency, region of origin and business background. For this test, students were classified into

one of four world regional groups reflecting English proficiency (Australia, Europe & India, Asia, Other). Students were also classified into those who had a business background prior to commencing a postgraduate business degree and those who did not. The model tested is as follows.

$$GPA = a + b_1\text{English Proficiency} + b_2\text{Region of Origin} + b_3\text{Business Background}$$

Table 3: Multivariate Predictors of GPA - OLS Regression

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standard error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	p
Constant	3.437	0.053		64.530	<0.001
English proficiency	-0.202	0.035	-0.146	-5.695	<0.001
Region of origin	-0.126	0.017	-0.185	-7.226	<0.001

$R^2 = 0.074$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.072$; n = 1,597

Following a stepwise process, the model revealed that English proficiency and region of origin are significantly associated with GPA (Table 3). Business background is not significantly associated with academic performance consistent with [3]. The model explains 7.2% of the variation in GPA. The association between language proficiency and academic performance found in this study is consistent with the findings of [5] and [2].

The results suggests that it does not matter whether a student has a business oriented academic background in determining their likely academic performance in a postgraduate business program. The significant determinants of GPA are found in this study to be English proficiency and world region of origin.

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