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### **Decisions at the borderline: the case of non-native English speaking postgraduate students (0040)**

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Since 2003/4, one third of the postgraduate UK student population have come from overseas; a change that poses challenges to UK higher educational institutions in the selection and support of non-native English speakers (NNES). In response, HEIs have introduced pre-sessional English language courses for borderline students but little is known about these students' subsequent progress. The present research examined the progress of 24 borderline NNES students during Masters study at a UK HEI. Profiles were constructed for each student consisting of English language test scores, pre-sessional course reports, reviews of examination scripts, a survey of thesis supervisors and the outcomes of initial thesis submission. The group performed in line with their borderline status throughout with concerns most prominent during thesis supervision. The findings from this single case study are of limited generalisability but point to the difficulties, of method and judgement, involved in the assessment of NNES students' linguistic proficiency.

### **Decisions at the borderline: the case of non-native English speaking postgraduate students**

Internationalisation continues to pose considerable challenges to UK higher education institutions (HEIs) in the selection of non-native English speakers (NNES), as rising numbers of students seek degree level study outside their home countries. Figures from the International Institute for Education estimate that the UK was the second most popular destination for foreign students seeking higher educational study in 2008 [IIE, 2009]. National policies, in the form of Prime Minister's Initiatives 1 and 2 in 1999 and 2006, have accelerated the trend that specified target numbers for student enrolment [DIUS, 2009]. The impact has fallen disproportionately upon the postgraduate sector with non-UK students contributing one third of all UK postgraduate students since 2003/4. Unfortunately, the figures cannot indicate how many of these are non-native English speakers (NNES) but the significance of the problem can be gauged from a recent political debate about falling degree standards and students' English language proficiency [Coghlan, 2008; Select Committee, 2008]. Similar debates have arisen in other countries, notably in Australia in the 1990s where there was a comparable influx of NNES students into higher education [Coley, 1999].

Several UK higher educational institutions (HEIs) have embraced internationalisation strategies and provided pre-sessional English language courses to ensure that NNES students attain the required proficiency for the start of the degree programme. Pre-sessional course students are not necessarily required to sit a formal English test at the end of the period of language study because the in-course assessment provides an alternative more appropriate to context. However, this leaves open the questions of what standard of English language proficiency has been attained and whether it is

sufficient for Masters level study without the need for ongoing English language support. There is little existing evidence or published research which could shed light on the progress of NNES students who attend pre-sessional courses in UK universities and who might be regarded as borderline in English language terms [Banerjee, 2003].

The present research, which formed part of a larger case study of selection of NNES students, aimed to examine the progress of borderline NNES students over the year of taught Masters study at a specialist UK HEI with a highly diverse student population. At the time of the research in 2007/8, there were 1600 taught Masters students of whom 36% were UK, 31% from the rest of the UK and 33% from elsewhere in the world.

In a preceding interview study, Course Directors had reported doubts about the reliability of English language tests to predict an individual student's potential to cope with Masters study in English and, in particular, had expressed concerns about writing proficiency. A research based thesis is a standard requirement for Masters programmes at the HEI and these findings guided the subsequent research process.

24 NNES students took the pre-sessional course prior to degree study. Because of the small numbers of participants, no attempts were made to analyse the data statistically. Individual profiles were constructed for each student that included the following data, subject to consent and availability:

- ◆ entry assessments of English language proficiency.
- ◆ Pre-test IELTS scores taken between the pre-sessional course and the Masters programmes.
- ◆ students' progress reports relating to the pre-sessional course.
- ◆ a review of students' examination scripts seeking comments about language.
- ◆ a short survey for thesis supervisors exploring their views of students' English language writing skills.
- ◆ the assessment outcomes of initial thesis submission.

Although the data collected prior to the start of degree study were not strictly comparative, they were broadly consistent for individual students. For the subsequent data, the group performed in line with their borderline status until the end of the year. Marker's criticisms of language and style were found on the exam scripts of six students who were all instructed to revise and represent their theses. 15 out of 22 thesis supervisors responded to the questionnaire and 11 reported that their supervisee's English language proficiency had adversely affected their supervisory workload. The theses of eight students were passed on first submission; 14 students were instructed to revise and represent their theses and one student was offered a PGDiploma rather than a Masters award. Only two students passed their theses on first submission and did not receive critical comments upon their exam script writing abilities. The study confirms the findings from the prior interview study regarding the writing abilities of NNES students, especially, in relation to the thesis.

The findings from this single case study limit the drawing of conclusions on a larger scale but indicate the necessity for comparative studies in other HEI settings. Similarly, they point to the difficulties, of method and judgement, involved in the assessment of NNES students' linguistic proficiency. Future research might extend the current study by exploring the progress of NNES taught Masters students with higher English test scores at entry. Replication of the findings elsewhere would raise questions about the policy of internationalisation as well as holding implications for the provision of English language support for NNES students in UK HEIs.

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