

How good does an international student's English really need to be?

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Although some international students rank among the top performers in UK universities, they perform notably less well on average than home students. Since for many international students English is a foreign language, it is important to consider the role that language plays in their lower level of academic success.

Language and literacy are cornerstones of attainment in every academic subject. Limited proficiency in the language of instruction diminishes the opportunity to learn and makes assessment challenging. The system recognises this to some extent by asking international students to take a recognised language test to prove their readiness to study in English. One such test is the IELTS, which is scored from 1 to 9, with 5.5 representing the government's minimum requirement for degree-level study.

International students accept their offers in good faith, believing that if they have met the entry criteria, their English must be good enough to allow them to fulfil their academic potential. But the fact is that an IELTS score of 5.5 – or even one a few notches higher – may not be sufficient for them to learn and perform at the true level of their ability. And, for some, that realisation can be devastating.

In a recent University of York study, psychologist Meesha Warmington and I asked how much the language and literacy skills of international students differ from those of home students, and how much they affect academic success.

We recruited 63 newly arrived Chinese students and 64 home students. The international students had a good command of English by the sector's standards, with IELTS scores between 6.5 and 7.5. We tested the non-verbal intelligence of both groups and found no differences. For language, however, a very different story emerged.

International students had an average English vocabulary just under half the size of that of the home students. Furthermore, they read and processed information in English at half the speed, understood significantly less of what they read and were less able to summarise in writing what they had read.

They were at a striking disadvantage regarding the language skills that are essential for academic success, despite arriving with a proficiency well above the government's minimum threshold. To put this in context, their difficulties with reading and writing were far greater than those reported on the same tests for home students with dyslexia.

You might assume that while international students may struggle at the beginning of their courses, their immersion in an English-speaking environment would soon get them up to speed in linguistic terms. But we tested both groups again at the end of

the academic year and the gap had not narrowed. Our next step will be to replicate these findings in a larger sample, including students from different countries.

Critically, English skills on entry were strongly linked to academic success for international students: those arriving with better English achieved higher grades and failed fewer credits. Home students' language skills, by contrast, were not predictive of their academic success. This confirms that English skills constrain academic success only below a certain threshold of proficiency, and suggests that the government's minimum standards are not aligned with this threshold.

So where does the threshold lie? Our study cannot provide a definitive answer, but it suggests that it falls at, or above, a level equivalent to an IELTS score of 7.5. A student at that level performs, on average, a whole degree classification better than a similarly able student with a score of 6.5. This further demonstrates that the problem is not the language test but in how high (or, rather, low) universities are ready to set the bar.

No one should take our findings to mean that international students cannot do well in UK universities. On the contrary, our findings show that many are capable of doing much better than their language abilities allow them to. The question is, what could universities do to better recognise and support these students' additional learning needs?

Greater caution is clearly required in setting language entry requirements; assumptions that students will quickly catch up when immersed in the environment are unrealistic even when dedicated language support is provided. In addition, applicants should be made aware that if they hope to perform as well as they are capable of, their proficiency in English should be much higher than indicated by current minimum entry requirements.

Most crucially, reasonable adjustments that recognise the disadvantage with which many international students pursue their education should be made. Students who read and write in English at half the speed of their peers will need extra time in exams. They may also need two years to meaningfully engage with material that other students can cover in a year. And universities could abolish policies that disproportionately affect international students, such as bans on using dictionaries in exams.

International students are hugely important to UK universities, financially, culturally and academically. It is only right, therefore, that the sector and its regulators do not turn a blind eye to the differential attainment problem they face – and to the important role that language plays in it.