

The Evaluation of the University Language Admission Standard in Australia

A Case Study based on IELTS Scores

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ABSTRACT

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores are widely adopted by universities as a language admission standard. A few studies have focused on the predictive validity of the IELTS test on the subsequent academic performance; however, few studies have explored the rationality of language entry requirement based on the correlation between IELTS scores and academic performance. The current study specifically investigates the Chinese international students enrolled in the Master of Applied Linguistics (AL) at the University of Melbourne (UoM). By finding the predictive validity of entry IELTS scores on the academic performance manifested the weighted average mark (WAM) in the first semester, the study aims to explore whether the English language entry requirements of AL in UoM and the University of Melbourne English Bridging Programs (UMELBP) are reasonable. According to the results, the language entry requirement of AL is reasonable, yet the language entrance standard of UMELBP needs to be reconsidered. Despite the UMELBP study, it seems like students with an IELTS score of 6.0 still lack academic learning skills in a university environment.

Keywords: language admission standard, IELTS scores, predictive validity, academic performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the globalization and the implementation of education as an export, universities worldwide have accepted a large number of full fee-paying international students to benefit their income and expand their international reputation. For international students who study in the target country, grasping the target language is a primary basis of academic learning. In Australia, universities set language admission standards to ensure the international students obtain the English proficiency required by universities. International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores are widely used by Australian universities to measure whether an international student achieves the university academic English level.

1.1. IELTS Scores and The University Language Admission Standard in Australia

IELTS test consists of four tasks, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The performance of test-takers on these four tasks is calculated by a specific

score scale from 1 to 9. Based on the average of four sections, an overall score between 1 and 9 is generated. According to the IELTS test score guidance [1], students can be accepted in linguistic-related courses only when they reached IELTS overall 7.5. The guidance mentions that an overall score of 7.0 might be acceptable, while rating 6.5 and below requires more English study.

However, different from the demand of IELTS (2021), many Australian universities have set an IELTS overall score of 6.5 (no subtest band less than 6.0) as a minimum language admission standard in linguistic-related courses. At the University of Melbourne (UoM), the language entry requirement of the Master of Applied Linguistics (AL) is IELTS 6.5 (no subtest band less than 6.0). It is thus reasonable to doubt whether students enrolling in the AL program at UoM have the academic quality of linguistic-related courses.

It is also worth noting that there is an academic pathway in universities for students who fail to obtain the required admission language score. Most Australian universities provide a language bridging program for learners as a pathway to go to the university. Students

whose IELTS scores are slightly below the language entry requirements are allowed to attend the language bridging program. When they pass exams from the program, they can directly go to the university. UMELBP in UoM is a representative of the language bridging program in Australia. Students who fail to meet the minimum language requirement (IELTS overall score 6.5 and no subtest band less than 6) of the AL program in UoM but have an overall band 6 and 6.5 (no band less than 5.5) can enter a ten-week language program in UMELBP. After passing tasks in the program, they are offered by UoM.

The validity of the language bridging programs has been examined in some studies. The findings illustrate that the students who enter the university via language bridging programs always struggle with language issues when completing their degree [2, 3]. It has also claimed that this type of international students generally receives a lower weighted average mark (WAM) than those directly enrol in the university [4]. Therefore, it is worth noting whether the set of UMELBP helps students obtain the university academic level.

1.2. The Predictive Validity of IELTS on Students' Academic Performance

The predictive validity of IELTS on subsequent academic success has been examined in the last few decades [5]. Most recent studies have chosen first semester GPA or WAM as the research data because the impact of English language proficiency on the academic performance after one-semester study is likely to show a non-significance [6]. Studies on the correlation between IELTS overall score and semester 1 GPA have found controversial results [7-10]. A few researchers have found no significance [8, 11]. However, some findings demonstrate a certain correlation between IELTS overall score and semester 1 GPA. Among these results, a weak correlation (around .3) is a typical finding [7] [12]. In contrast, Woodrow [10] has found a weak to moderate correlation ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$) and Müller & Daller [9] have got a moderate relationship ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.05$).

In addition to the overall score, the predictive validity of subtests on academic performance has also been explored. Previous studies have found that the reading and writing tasks are the strongest predictor. For instance, Kerstjens and Nery [8] demonstrate $r = 0.23$ ($p < 0.01$) of the reading task while $r = 0.20$ ($p < 0.05$) of the writing task on semester 1 GPA. However, a study conducted by has found listening as the strongest predictor ($r = .40$, $p < .05$) [6].

Based on the above considerations, the current study conducts a case study and investigates 51 Chinese international students enrolled in the Master of AL at the UoM. The predictive validity of IELTS scores on

students' subsequent academic performance is first analysed. Based on the correlation, the study then tries to explore the rationality of the language admission standard of UoM and the effect of UMELBP.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

(1) To what degree is the overall band of IELTS tests and subtest scores (listening, reading, writing, and speaking tasks) related to academic achievement?

(2) Is it reasonable to set 6.5 (no band less than 6.0) in IELTS tests as the entrance standard of AL graduate courses?

(3) Whether UMELBP helps international learners achieve the language proficiency of the university learning in UoM?)

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The data collected from 51 Chinese students (47 females and 4 males), majoring in the master of AL at UoM. Their ages ranged from 23 to 29. They all spoke Mandarin Chinese as the only L1 and English as the sole L2. Only 40% of them studied linguistics as undergraduates, and half of them had a working experience related to English education. The IELTS scores they reported in this study were used to apply for the current major, ranged from 6.0 to 8.0. It should be noted that 19 did not meet the required IELTS scores and attended UMELBP before studying the current major. Their participation in this study was voluntary.

3.2. Instruments

In the present study, a survey questionnaire in the electronic version was adopted for collecting data. The questionnaire given to the participants was in Chinese (which was translated into English in the Appendix). It was divided into two parts. The first part was designed for gathering participants' factual data, including gender, age, major of undergraduate, working experience and UMELBP experience, IELTS scores, and WAM in the first semester. To control the survey time, assist the participants in providing accurate answers and make the process of quantifying and analyzing the answers efficiently, the second part was designed in single choices to understand their attitudes toward the reliability of IELTS tests, the degree to which English language proficiency affected their academic performance, and the main factors influenced their WAM.

3.3. Procedures

In the main study, the questionnaire was distributed to 51 participants through students' university email. They had been told about the content and the time taken of the survey (around 5 minutes) in advance. They were all informed when the questionnaire was distributed. Meanwhile, they were told that they had to finish the questionnaire and then send it back through email within one day. 51 questionnaires were received in planned time, and they were all valid.

3.4 Analysis

The Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) program version 27 was performed to compute descriptive statistics in each question. For research question 1, Pearson correlations were performed to examine the relationship between IELTS scores (overall and subtests) and semester 1 WAM. For research question 2, the participants were divided into three English language proficiency groups based on their entry IELTS overall bands (see Table 1). A One-way ANOVA and paired t-test for post hoc analysis were operated to find whether setting IELTS overall score 6.5 instead of 7.0 as the language admission standard in a linguistically related program is reasonable. Then, for research question 3, paired t-tests were conducted to investigate whether there is a different performance between students enrolled in the major in two different ways (directly going to the university and passing UMELBP exams to go to the university).

Table 1. English language proficiency groups on IELTS scores

English language proficiency groups	IELTS overall band	N
1	6.0	7
2	6.5	28
3	7.0 and above	16

4. RESULTS

To address research question 1, descriptive statistics of semester 1 WAM corresponding to each IELTS band were first produced. Table 2 illustrated that band 6.5 had the highest number of students ($n = 28$) while band 7.0 had the second highest number ($n = 12$). Only one student got band 8.0. It can also be seen that band 6.0 and 6.5 had the lowest minimum WAM in the first semester. The maximum semester 1 WAM in band 6.0 was below 80 while that in other bands was at least 80. On average, students with a higher IELTS overall band had a higher WAM in the first semester. This trend can be seen clearly in Figure 1. From Table 2, it is also noteworthy that the individual WAMs were highly homogenous in each IELTS band ($SD < \frac{1}{3} \text{mean}$), although it might account for the small sample size.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of semester 1 WAM in each IELTS overall band

IELTS	N	Weighted average mark (WAM)			
		Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
6.0	7	62	78	71.29	4.82
6.5	28	62	85	75.02	4.56
7.0	12	70	80	75.25	3.51
7.5	3	80	85	82.33	2.52
8.0	1	85	85	85.00	0.00

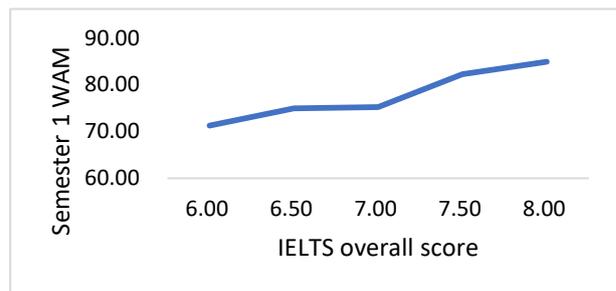


Figure 1. Semester 1 WAM mean in each IELTS overall band

Pearson correlation between semester 1 WAM and IELTS overall score was then calculated. According to Table 3, their correlation coefficient was a moderate correlation ($r = .487$), which indicated that 23.71% of WAM was explained through the IELTS overall score. Table 3 also demonstrated the relationships between four subtests in IELTS and semester 1 WAM. Except for speaking, the other three subtests all had a significant correlation related to semester 1 WAM. From Table 3, it can be concluded that listening had the strongest correlation ($r = .514$) among three subtests, and its correlation with semester 1 WAM was stronger than the overall score's ($r = .487$). Furthermore, both writing ($r = .374$) and reading ($r = .364$) had a small to moderate correlation regarding WAM in the first semester, which was weaker than the overall score.

Table 3. Correlations between semester 1 WAM and IELTS scores

	Weighted average mark (WAM)
Overall	.487***
Listening	.514***
Writing	.374**
Reading	.364**
Speaking	.272

Note: * indicates $p < .05$, ** indicates $p < .01$, and *** indicates $p < .001$.

Students' self-assessment of the impact of four skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) on academic

performance was also investigated via questionnaires. Participants were asked to choose the skills that affected their academic performance from their viewpoint. Based on Figure 2, writing was regarded as the primary factor with 39% of votes, followed by reading with 30%. Speaking was voted as the weakest factor, at 11%. Surprisingly, the impact of listening was only accounting for 19%. This result was differed from the correlation finding according to the actual performance of students.

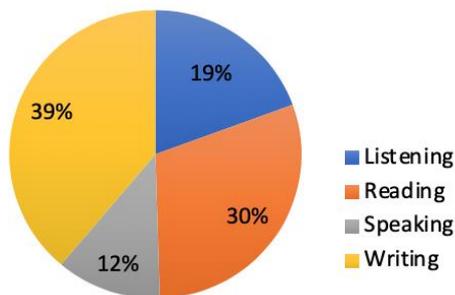


Figure 2. Frequency of four skills that impact academic performance on self-evaluation

To explore research question 2, means and standard deviations of semester 1 WAM in terms of three English language proficiency groups were first generated. As shown in Table 4, the individual WAM in each proficiency group was highly homogenous ($SD < \frac{1}{3} \text{mean}$). Higher proficiency participants had a higher WAM mean, ranged from 74 to 77.2.

Table 4. English language proficiency groups on IELTS scores

Groups	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
1	7	62	78	71.3	4.82
2	28	62	85	75	4.56
3	16	70	85	77.2	4.72

Note: N refers to the numbers of students in the group

One-way ANOVA was then performed to compare these three proficiency groups, which illustrated significant differences of semester 1 WAM ($F(3,97) = 2, p < .05$). Then, Scheffe's post hoc analysis was used to explore where the difference was located. The result demonstrated only one significant difference between the two groups. Semester 1 WAM of group 3 was significantly higher than that in group 1, with a small effect size ($d = 1.24$).

Three paired t-tests were used to examine whether students who attended UMEPBP performed differently from the students who directly entered the university. Table 5 showed that there was no significant difference in semester 1 WAM between students who scored IELTS 6.5 but attended UNELBP and directly attended the university ($t(42) = .27, p = .87$).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics and paired t-test of semester 1 WAM in the students with two types of conditions

Groups	N	Descriptive statistics		t-value		
		M	SD	df	t	p
6.0 attending UMEELBP	7	71.3	4.82	14	-2.13	.051
6.5 attending UMEELBP	9	76.2	4.38			

Table 6 showed that there was no significant difference in semester 1 WAM between students who scored IELTS 6.5 and 6.0 attended UMEELBP ($t(14) = .213, p = .051$).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics and paired t-test of semester 1 WAM from two groups of students

Groups	N	Descriptive statistics		t-value		
		M	SD	df	t	p
6.5 attending UMEELBP	9	76.2	4.38	42	-	.87
6.5 and above not attending UMEELBP	35	75.7	4.81			.27

The third comparison was between the students who attended UMEELBP with IELTS overall 6.0 and the students who did not attend UMEELBP. As illustrated in Table 7, the students who directly entered the university had a significantly higher WAM than those with IELTS overall 6.0 attended UMEELBP ($t(40) = 2.21, p < .05$). The effect size was large ($d = 0.91$).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics and paired t-test of semester 1 WAM in the students with two types of conditions

Groups	N	Descriptive statistics		t-value		
		M	SD	df	t	p
6.0 attending UMEELBP	7	71.3	4.82	40	-	.032
6.5 and above not attending UMEELBP	35	75.7	4.81			2.21

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to examine the impacts of IELTS scores on semester 1 WAM based on AL graduates, and on this basis further discuss the appropriateness of the language requirement concerning the master of AL at the UoM and the useless of UMELBP.

Regarding the first research question, the current study has found that the predictive relationship between IELTS overall score and semester 1 WAM was moderately strong, indicating that the predictive ability of IELTS scores to academic performances is moderately strong. This result supports the work of Müller and Daller [9] and Woodrow [10], but differs from the common finding of previous studies, which have indicated a weak correlation around $r = .3$ [7, 12] or a non-significant relationship [8, 11]. The difference could be explained by diverse program setting [10, 13]. Assignments in different majors reflect different degrees of academic English proficiency. As mentioned before, AL is a linguistically demanding graduate course whose academic assessments are based on writing papers. Thus, the academic English language proficiency can be reflected well in academic achievements in AL program and the correlation between IELTS score and WAM is stronger.

In terms of the predictive validity of IELTS subtest scores, this study has found that listening, writing, and reading are significant predictors. Among these three subtests, listening is the strongest predictor in the current study, which aligns with the work conducted by Elder [6]. Additionally, the predictive validity of writing and reading are similar, around .37. The correlations of writing and reading are in accordance with many previous studies [8, 13]; however, these two subtests have been found as the strongest correlation. The reason why listening has the highest value may attribute to the inadequate knowledge background of the students [6]. According to the questionnaire, more than half of the participants had an undergraduate degree unrelated to linguistics, which means they may depend heavily on the class input. Listening skill may thus closely relate to academic grades.

Additionally, in participants' self-assessment of the impact skills in academic learning, only the result of listening skill different from findings in correlations. It is interesting to find that participants have viewed listening as the third factor impacting their study outcomes. Possibly because they view a high-quality paper as the combination of reading comprehension and language organization ability; however, the aim of writing paper is to examine their comprehensions of contents in class.

For the second question, the outcome of one-way ANOVA indicated that participants with an IELTS

overall score of 6 had a different academic performance compared with 7 or higher IELTS overall scores. By contrast, there were no significant differences in the first-semester academic performance between the students with IELTS overall 6 and 6.5, 6.5 and 7.0 – 8.0. Therefore, IELTS overall 6.5 appeared to be suitable as the minimum entry requirement for the master of AL at UoM although the IELTS official recommended score was at least 7.0. However, it should be noted that the students with IELTS overall 6.5 had no significant differences in the first-semester academic achievement in whether they attended UMELBP or not. Thus, whether the language requirement of subtests (no band less than 6.0) was necessary when the overall score reaching 6.5 required further investigation since this type of students completing the courses in language bridging programs.

For the third question, regarding the language bridging program, the language entry requirement of UMELBP has been examined. The current study demonstrates that students attending UMELBP with an IELTS score of 6.0 obtained significantly lower WAM in the first semester. Therefore, it seems that the entry score of UMELBP needs to adjust to IELTS overall 6.5 instead of the previous 6.0. However, as mentioned above, there is no available evidence showing that the satisfactory academic performance of the students attending UMELBP with an IELTS score of 6.5 is due to the language bridging program. Considering previous studies, some have argued that the language program has a limited effect on improving English proficiency [14]. Thus, the efficacy of UMELBP is required specific context research.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, the current study has investigated the predictive validity of IELTS scores on first-semester academic performance in the master of AL at UoM and the admission standard of UoM and UMELBP, which may assist the faculty of AL to establish IELTS admission requirements.

This study has found that IELTS overall score and semester 1 WAM have a moderate correlation. Listening as the strongest predictor among the four subtests has a stronger relationship with academic success than the IELTS overall score. The predictive validity of reading and writing is weak to moderate. The study also has proved that IELTS overall 6.5 is a reasonable minimum entry language standard although some students attended the language bridging program (UMELBP). For the entry requirement of UMELBP, the result has suggested that IELTS overall 6.0 should be reconsidered to be accepted or not.

There are some limitations in the current study that needed to be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 51

is inadequate to generalize the results to the whole AL faculty. Second, other factors that may impact academic performance has not been analysed due to time limitation. Participants are limited to Chinese international students and there are no international students from other countries. Finally, there are no available empirical studies regarding the impacts of UMELBP on language proficiency and academic abilities. Several limitations, such as small sample size, limited to Chinese international students in UoM, and lack of analysing other potential factors influencing academic performance and unavailable empirical studies of UMELBP, are also mentioned. Thus, the factors such as academic knowledge background, relevant working experience, and learning strategies should be integrated in further studies. The requirement of subtest scores also needs to be further confirmed. Besides, the role of UMELBP should be examined in the future.

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