

4. Use of the IELTS General Training module in technical and vocational tertiary institutions: A case study from Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

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This project investigates the use of the IELTS General Training module in the technical and vocational sector, exploring the programs for which it is used, the extent to which it predicts success in the programs and perceptions of the Test.

Technical and vocational courses form a rapidly growing part of the tertiary environment in Aotearoa New Zealand. This area presents opportunities for tertiary education providers focusing on international students who do not have the academic ability for, or interest in, degree-level study, or who are studying niche subjects. One of the intended purposes of the General Training module of IELTS is as a test for students entering such non-degree level education programs.

This project explored the following aspects of the use of the General Training module in the technical and vocational sector: the programs for which it is used, the extent to which it predicts success in the programs, other language-related factors involved in success, and student and staff perceptions of the Test. The project was a case study of all available institutions offering technical and vocational courses in one city. Eight institutions were investigated, with subject areas as varied as engineering, performance arts and aviation. The institutions ranged from large public providers with over 30,000 students (1300 international students) to small private providers with fewer than 20 students (all international). In-depth interviews were also carried out with 16 staff and 14 students.

The study found that the General Training module was not well-known by students or staff in technical and vocational tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand, and few people had personal knowledge or experience of the Test. This was influenced by: the sector being extremely fluid, affecting institutional knowledge; student transfers from degrees to vocational programs; confusion about student visa requirements; institutions not insisting on English language requirements; and institutions setting their own tests. In addition, some institutions had changed their entry requirements from the General Training to the Academic module.

The main recommendation from the study is that IELTS should work on raising awareness about the General Training module as an option for technical and vocational program entry requirements among students, tertiary providers and industry training organisations. The constant changes in the sector mean that this awareness raising needs to be an ongoing task.

Note: **Aotearoa New Zealand** is the bilingual name for New Zealand. It is particularly used in contexts which emphasise the inclusiveness of all New Zealanders. The Māori name 'Aotearoa' is translated as 'Land of the long white cloud'.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This section provides an overview of technical and vocational education in Aotearoa New Zealand. It then explains the language testing issues for the sector and how the IELTS General Training module relates to this, before outlining the research questions which framed the study.

1.1 Background to the study

Major changes have taken place in Aotearoa New Zealand education since the *1989 Education Act* which moved the education system from a centralised to devolved system (Ministry of Education 2004, p 3). There are a number of ways in which these changes have affected vocational and technical education.

The first point to note is that providers of tertiary education are classified according to their legally defined roles, with an emphasis on ‘distinctive contributions’ of each type in order ‘to ensure a diversity of education provision’ (Ministry of Education 2006, p 14). These seven types of providers are:

1. Universities
2. Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics
3. Wānanga (Māori tertiary institutions)
4. Industry Training Organisations
5. Private Training Establishments
6. Adult and Community Education Providers
7. Other Tertiary Education Providers.

The emphasis on devolution and diversity in tertiary education means that ‘(t)here are no fixed divisions between the types of courses offered by each classification of provider’ (Ministry of Education 2004, p 7). Therefore, technical and vocational courses might be offered by any of the seven types of tertiary providers. This means that there is no structured equivalent to overseas education systems such as Australia’s clearly differentiated Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education sectors (Australian Qualifications Framework 2007).

Abbott (2004, p 6) notes that there has been an increase in the vocational education and training sector and that a feature of the education and training sector in the 1990s has been the growth of private tertiary education providers who have moved ‘very substantially’ into vocational education and training, with student enrolments comprising 17% of total enrolments in 2002.

A second result of the 1989 changes was that public education institutions could charge full fees to international students and this resulted in a huge push into ‘export education’. McInnis, Peacock, Catherwood and Brown (2006, pp 26-28) describe a number of developments including the following: high numbers of international students initially went to polytechnics and private training institutions (including language schools) but most are now at universities; the proportion of international students at higher (degree and diploma) level has risen compared with certificate level; most of the international students are from Asia; and there is a growing number of international students studying management and commerce subjects (since this is a popular choice for Asian students – eg Massey University’s NetBig program where Chinese students had direct entry into second year business courses, see http://www.massey.ac.nz/~wwpubafs/_2001/publications_2001/Massey_News/August/Aug_13/stories/netbig.html). The trend for international students to attend universities and higher level courses generally means that the students are probably sitting IELTS Academic rather than General Training modules.

Another major change in the education system has been the development of the National Qualifications Framework. The aims of the framework include ‘to enable and encourage diversity among providers of education and training’, and ‘to encourage a wider range of educational settings’ (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2005, p 6). In addition, the framework ‘was intended to lead the development of unit standards and qualifications in sectors and disciplines that had previously had no qualifications’ (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2005, p 4). Qualifications are now registered nationally at one of 10 levels on the framework. Certificates are at Levels 1 to 4, diplomas at Levels 5 and 6, bachelor degrees and diplomas at Level 7, postgraduate degrees and diplomas at Level 8, masters degrees at Level 9, and doctorates at Level 10. The universities withdrew from the framework in 1996, although university degrees are still registered (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2005, p 4).

The framework has therefore allowed small niche providers to register their courses for recognition. These in turn may enable students to be eligible for ‘bonus points’ for immigration. The Immigration Service’s Bonus Points table (New Zealand Immigration Service 2007) states that ‘(b)onus points are awarded for a recognised New Zealand Qualification (and at least two years study in NZ)’. Participants in the study reported that such qualifications must be at Level 5 of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework.

Finally, impacts have resulted from the introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) because the national secondary school leaving qualifications are linked into the National Qualifications Framework. Students can study for and achieve credits at Levels 1 to 3 on the framework in any year of secondary school, and can also study at Level 4 for national scholarship examinations, but do not gain credits for this (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2007). Although there are not yet any specific standards for English as a Second Language, students who have been attending secondary schools must use their NCEA credits for university matriculation rather than an international test such as IELTS. The increase in immigration has meant that there have been higher numbers of students with non-English speaking backgrounds but who have permanent resident status (rather than ‘international’ status). These students cannot be required to meet different language entry requirements from other permanent residents. Therefore, tertiary education providers do not ask such information from students and so, in many cases, do not officially know how many ESOL students are enrolled in their programs.

These developments in the education sector of Aotearoa New Zealand have all had implications for an international test such as the IELTS General Training module.

1.2 The IELTS General Training module

The development of the export education market presents opportunities for those tertiary education providers focusing on students who do not have the academic ability or interest for degree-level study, or who are focusing on niche subject areas. One of the intended purposes of the General Training module of IELTS is as a test for students entering such non-degree level education programs:

General Training is suitable for candidates who are going to English-speaking countries to complete their secondary education, to undertake work experience or training programs not at degree level... (IELTS 2007, p 2)

The General Training module sub-tests are for Reading and Writing only; Listening and Speaking tests are the same for all test-takers irrespective of whether they are taking General Training or Academic modules. The General Training Reading and Writing sub-tests ‘emphasise basic survival skills in a broad social and educational context’ (IELTS 2007, p 2).

Most candidates who sit the General Training module worldwide do so for immigration; approximately three-quarters of all General Training candidates in 2003 indicated that their purpose for taking the Test was for immigration (IELTS 2003, p 3). There was a similar proportion of candidates sitting the General Training module in New Zealand in 2004 who gave immigration to a range of English-speaking countries as their reason for sitting the Test, at 76.2% of 1873 candidates (IELTS Australia, 28/11/05). However, study plays an important role in the final aim of immigration, because out of these students, 69.1% of 1873 intended to stay in New Zealand, and the reasons given by these candidates relating to study included higher education extended courses (83 candidates), professional registration (49 candidates), training or work experience (36 candidates), higher education short courses (7 candidates), and Professional and Training Assessment Board registration (PLAB – for international medical registration) (5 candidates). Although these are a small proportion of candidates sitting the General Training module, the numbers would have been supplemented by other intending students who sat their tests before arriving in New Zealand.

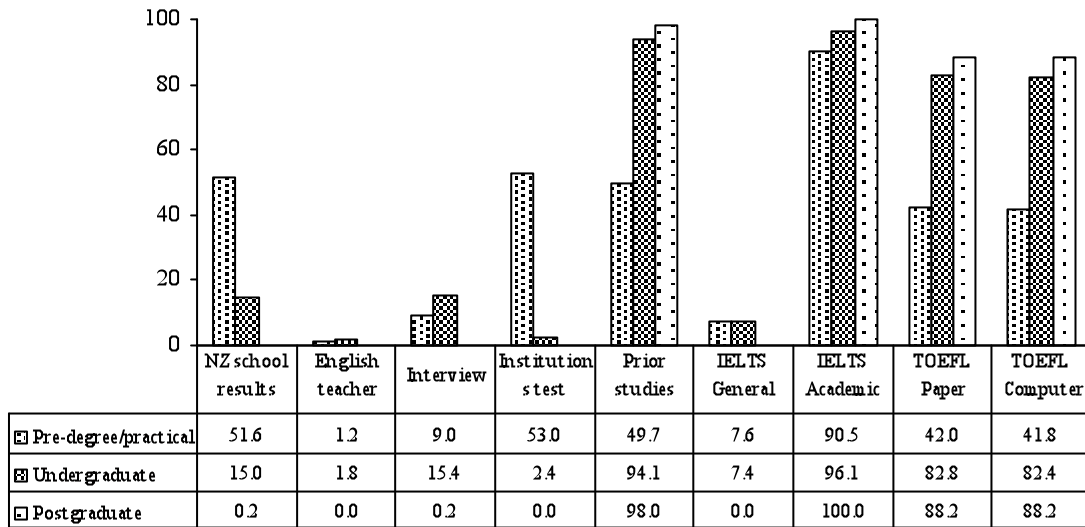
The Academic module is the most commonly used test for admission into tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand but the General Training module is also used for practical programs by a number of institutions, as was discovered in our previous IELTS-funded research (Smith and Haslett 2007). This indicates that the General Training module is also an area of research interest for institutions which have a technical or vocational rather than an academic focus.

The numbers of New Zealand candidates for the General Training and Academic modules in 2004 are listed in Table 1. This shows that the number of candidates taking the General Training module was much lower (1815) than those taking the Academic module (13,931). The largest percentage of General Training module candidates was in Auckland (58.3%), followed by Christchurch (18.9%). There were smaller percentages of candidates in Hamilton (8.5%), Palmerston North and Dunedin (each 4.1%), Wellington (3.9%) and Rotorua (2.2%).

City (from north to south)	GT candidates	Academic candidates	City GT as a % of total GT candidates
Auckland	1058	8004	58.3%
Hamilton	155	894	8.5%
Rotorua	40	313	2.2%
Palmerston North	74	1306	4.1%
Wellington	71	669	3.9%
Christchurch	343	2189	18.9%
Dunedin	74	556	4.1%
TOTALS	1815	13,931	100%

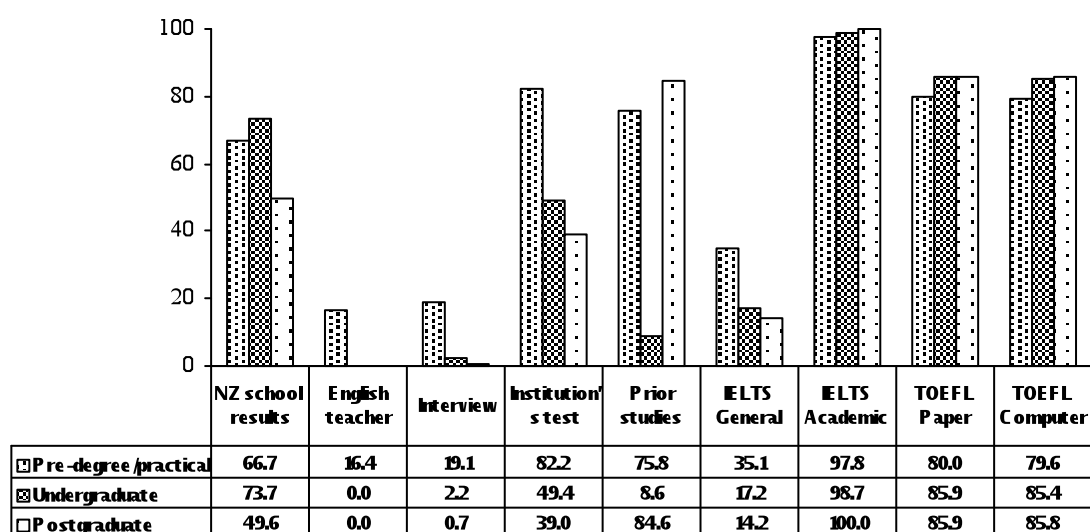
**Table 1: IELTS candidates in New Zealand, 2004, by city
(IELTS Australia, 28/11/05)**

Figures 1a and 1b show results from our previous study of English language tests used for entry by the two main types of tertiary provider (Smith and Haslett 2007). The IELTS Academic module was accepted by the highest proportion of both public and private providers: for public providers 90.5% of those teaching at pre-degree/practical level, 96.1% at undergraduate level, and 100% at postgraduate level; and for private providers 98.7%, 97.8%, and 100% respectively. As would be expected, the proportion of those accepting the IELTS General Training module was much lower for public providers: at 7.6% of those teaching at pre-degree/practical level, 7.4% at undergraduate level, and none at post-graduate level. However, the proportions of private providers accepting the General Training module was higher: 35.1% at pre-degree/practical level, 17.2% at undergraduate level, and 14.2% at post-graduate level.



Percentages by qualification type, scaled by numbers of students
Source: Smith and Haslett (2007)

Figure 1a: Proportion of public tertiary providers accepting English language assessment methods, by tertiary levels



Percentages by qualification type, scaled by numbers of students
 Source: Smith and Haslett (2007)

Figure 1b: Proportion of private tertiary providers accepting English language assessment methods, by tertiary level

Although a variety of levels were used for the Academic module, the levels for the General Training module were most likely to be at 5.0 or 5.5.

Further analysis of these results found that respondents from 32 institutions reported accepting both modules, and 10 of these were at the pre-degree or practical level only. Respondents from 25 other institutions reported accepting the General Training but not the Academic module, and of these, 19 were at a pre-degree or practical level. The majority of those institutions which reported accepting only the General Training module had between 1–10 international students, which comprised between 1% and 10% of the total student body. However, there were two other larger programs with around 100 international students (who staff estimated to form most of the non-English speaking student population).

The following table gives some background information on all of the providers which reported accepting the General Training module in our previous study (Smith and Haslett 2007). This shows the estimated numbers of English as a Second Language (ESL) students in institutions ranging from the smaller niche providers, to larger providers of a range of courses. They have been divided into International ESL and Permanent Resident ESL (see discussion in Section 1.1 above).

Industry	No. providers (N=50)	No.s of international ESL students									No.s of permanent resident ESL students									
		0	1-10	11-20	21-100	101-201	501-1,000	1,000-5,000	5,000 +	No response	Unsure	None	1-100	101-200	201-500	501-1,000	1,001-5,000	5,000 +	No response	
Mixed ¹ (incl. business, hospitality, travel & tourism, music, security, warehousing)	15		3	3	3		1	2	2	1	5	1	7		1					1
Beauty and natural therapies (incl. hairdressing)	6	1	4	1							1	1	4							
Religious training	5		3		2								5							
Business (incl. computing, office) ²	4		3		1						1		3							
Outdoor recreation activities (incl. diving)	4	1	1		1					1	1	2								1
Art and design	4		1	1		1				1			3							1
Agriculture	3		2		1						2		1							
Aviation	3		2	1								1	1							1
Hospitality (incl. food & beverage)	2		2										2							
Early childhood education	2				1					1					1					1
Film	1		1								1									
Travel and tourism	1				1								1							

1: Where more than one response was received from the institution, student numbers have been averaged.

2: The main focus of these institutions, although some also offer other types of courses.

Table 2: Tertiary providers accepting the General Training module, 2004 national study

1.3 Research questions

Most research on the predictive validity of IELTS in Aotearoa New Zealand has been in academic programs at degree level (eg, Bellingham 1995; Beckman 2004; Barkhuizen and Cooper 2004; Skyrme 2004), and similarly in Australia (eg, Dooley 1999; Kerstjens and Nery 2000; Feast 2004). In these contexts the IELTS Academic module is used, and findings have highlighted the complexity of the relationship between English language proficiency levels and academic success. There do not appear to be similar studies examining the use of the IELTS General Training module.

While there has been a substantial amount of research on international students in Aotearoa New Zealand, this has tended to focus on issues relating to the larger public providers (eg, Smith and Rae 2004; Read and Hirsh 2005; McInnis, Peacock, Catherwood and Brown 2006), rather than issues relating to smaller private providers other than when they are English language providers (see for example McCallum 2004). In addition, there is little research specifically focusing on the vocational and technical training areas, particularly in the language areas.

This project was an investigation of the use of the General Training module in the technical and vocational sector in New Zealand, exploring the following aspects: the programs for which it is used, the extent to which it predicts success in the programs, other language-related factors involved in the success, and student and staff perceptions of the Test.

- 1 To what extent does the IELTS General Training module predict success in tertiary programs? Are any of the individual Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing scores critical in predicting success? How does the English proficiency score interact with other non-language program pre-requisites?
- 2 What other language-related factors are involved in student success in these programs? For example, language support provided, productive and receptive language requirements in the course, or methods of assessment? What is the relationship of these with non-language factors such as content-related skills and experiences?
- 3 What are the students' own perceptions of IELTS, their language proficiency, and language-related and non-language factors?
- 4 What are the staff perceptions?
- 5 For which subjects are institutions using the General Training module rather than the Academic module?

2 METHODOLOGY

The project was carried out as a case study of a provincial city in Aotearoa New Zealand. This section explains the rationale, the methods, the institutions involved and the data collection processes.

2.1 Rationale

A case study was chosen as the study method for this project because this would enable some in-depth analysis of a topic which had not been included in many previous studies (as outlined in Section 1.2 above). There would have been complications in designing a full-scale quantitative study because the numbers of students having used the IELTS General Training module as an entry requirement was unknown, and the resources available precluded the development of the necessary research frame. The interview methodology chosen allowed the flexibility of approach which would give rich data to inform the analysis.

The city was chosen because it is a well-known destination for international students and has a wide variety of tertiary education providers. This area had also included a range of institutions using the General Training module who participated in our previous research (Smith and Haslett 2007). The research was carried out with some institutions which used both the Academic and the General Training modules, and some which use only the General Training module. This choice of institutions allowed for comparison between the two modules.

2.2 Participating institutions

The nine institutions who had reported in our previous study that they accepted the General Training module were approached first, as they had already shown an interest in participating in research. Institutions had to be signatories to the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students, which is mandatory for any education provider wishing to enrol international students (Ministry of Education 2003). Five of the nine institutions did not participate in this study. One institution had closed and two declined to take part. A further two were no longer using the General Training module as an English language entry requirement because:

- the professional body for their graduates now required a score from the Academic module
- the other institution had very few international students from non-English speaking backgrounds and now had an alliance with a private language school if necessary.

These differences in the two years from our previous study exemplify the rapidly changing nature of the tertiary environment in this city, and may be assumed to represent the changes throughout the country.

We decided to try and increase the participation in the study and carried out an extensive examination of websites and city advertising outlets. Originally we had planned to investigate only institutions where IELTS General Training was used as an English language entry requirement but after the initial difficulties in locating institutions, we realised this would not result in a meaningful study. Therefore we decided to include any institutions which focused on vocational and technical training, in order to try and develop a picture of language issues in the sector. Two further successful identifications were made through the website search, another from a city tourism advertising outlet and a final one from an advertising signboard in the street. This resulted in a further four institutions taking part in the study, to make eight in total.

The eight institutions in the study ranged in size from large public providers with over 30,000 students (of which around 1300 were international students) to small private providers with less than 20 students (all international). In addition to a comprehensive study of the eight institutions themselves (which was supplemented by document analysis from the institutions), in-depth interviews were carried out with a total of 16 staff and 14 students.

As the student numbers in some programs and institutions were small, the differences between institutions became important. The advantages of small numbers in some institutions allowed for an in-depth case study approach within the institutions. However, to protect the confidentiality promised to the institutions, some information has been aggregated.

Table 3 gives an overview of the institutions which participated in the study, and the participants from each institution. It shows that while two of the institutions taught in several areas of vocational and technical training, the others were specialised. Only one was a public institution. Estimated numbers of students with English as a second language are also given, and their status as international or permanent resident students. The student body of one institution consisted entirely of international students.

Institution			Students			Research participants	
Inst. no.	Subject areas	Provider type	Total students (to nearest 20)	ESL as a per cent of total students (to nearest 5%)	Status (International or permanent resident)	Staff (N=16)	Students (N=14)
1	Mixed	Public	30,000	10-15%	Both	6	5
2	Mixed	Private	20	10%	Both	1	-
3	Agriculture	Private	varies ¹	varies	Both	1	-
4	Tourism	Private	40	30%	Both	2	5
5	Sports	Private	20	100%	International	3	-
6	Health	Private	140	100%	Both	1	-
7	Aviation	Private	20	35%	Both	1	4
8	Business	Private	60	75%	Both	1	-

1: Student numbers varied on a frequent basis because some courses were very short.

Table 3: Participating institutions

2.3 Data collection

Data was collected by means of structured interviews with students and staff. Semi-structured interview schedules were developed with reference to those used in previous impact studies about IELTS (Cotton and Conrow 1998; Kerstjens and Nery 2000; Coleman, Starfield and Hagan 2003), as well as a study of international students in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ward and Masgoret 2004).

- a The staff interview schedule is at Appendix 3, and includes questions to elicit:
 - information on position
 - information about the program
 - familiarity with the IELTS Test (and language proficiency issues)
 - language issues relating to the courses.

- b The student interview schedule is at Appendix 5, and includes questions to elicit:
 - background demographic information
 - information about their study
 - details about previous English study
 - information and opinions about their IELTS Test
 - details about language support for their course of study
 - ratings of success in the program.

Staff were contacted by telephone or email. As indicated above, this part of the study was more problematical than had originally been anticipated. The project was explained, a meeting time set up, and information sheets were forwarded wherever possible. The initial staff contacted were also asked if there would be any students or other staff available for interview at the same or another time. Students from three institutions were available for interview; although these represented a wide range of backgrounds, they may not be representative of the entire group.

Interviews were held in offices, meeting rooms or in the cafeteria. Staff interviews took around 45 minutes to an hour; student interviews took around 15 minutes each. Students were asked if they preferred to be interviewed together and in four cases they decided to answer in pairs (although only in one case did the pair of students have the same first languages). The interview schedules formed the basis of the interviews but for staff they were a guideline for exploring further topics. Most interviews were recorded for later transcribing and checking.

The interviews were supplemented by data found through institution websites, as well as that provided by the institutions of student entry levels, and more general information about the program aims and objectives.

2.4 Ethical issues

Student and staff respondents were invited to participate in accordance with research ethics. Participants were assured of confidentiality both for themselves and their institutions, which is why the location of the case study has not been identified. Information sheets were provided to all participants, in advance where possible, and consent forms signed before the interviews took place (see Appendices 1, 2, and 4).

2.5 Data analysis

Although the project initially planned to incorporate a quantitative approach, eventually it became clear that this was not possible within the scope of the study. Therefore the results include some overall descriptive statistics, but focus on the qualitative data which was obtained through the interviews, presenting the responses in the participants' own words wherever possible. It was found that the nature of the institutions reflected the high levels of diversity that is now a feature of the tertiary landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand, and this modified methodology permitted the diversity to be better identified and described.

3 FINDINGS

The findings from the interviews begin with a description of the backgrounds of the individual staff and student participants. Answers to each of the research questions (outlined in Section 1.3) are then described in turn, largely drawing on the extensive data transcribed from student and staff interviews.

3.1 Participant backgrounds

The titles of the 16 staff participants are shown in Table 4. This shows that the staff who took part in the study were all in senior management, administration or teaching positions in their institutions.

Position	Number (Total = 16)
Program Leader	5
Managing Director/Director	3
International Liaison Officer	2
Office Manager	1
Personal Assistant to the Director	1
Academic Administrator	1
Academic Dean	1
Learning Advisor	1
Marketing Officer	1

Table 4: Titles of participating staff

The backgrounds of the student participants are shown in Table 5. It can be seen that the majority of the students were male, and most were in their twenties. Half came from China, and the others were from a variety of regions. Their first languages were the dominant languages of those countries. Most had high school qualifications before coming to New Zealand, but three already had tertiary qualifications from their home countries.

Background	Number (Total = 14)	
Sex	Male	12
	Female	2
Age	18-20	3
	21-23	6
	24-26	1
	27-29	3
	30+	1
Country of origin	China	7
	Japan	2
	Bahrain	1
	Mexico	1
	Norway	1
	South Korea	1
	India	1
First language	Chinese (Mandarin)	5
	Japanese	2
	Chinese (Cantonese)	1
	Chinese (Taiwanese)	1
	Norwegian	1
	Korean	1
	Arabic	1
	Spanish	1
	Punjabi	1
	Qualifications – home	High school
Bachelor degree		2
Masters degree		1
None		1

Table 5: Backgrounds of participating students

The students' experience in New Zealand is outlined in Table 6. A third had been here for less than a year, and the rest had been here between one and five years. Six had not yet gained any local qualifications, but two had come from high school, three had taken university foundation courses, and four had tried some university study (without completing qualifications). Two had already gained a certificate, and one a diploma. The students were taking computer-aided design courses (5 students), travel and tourism (4 students), aviation (4 students) and business management/marketing (1 student).

Background		Number (Max = 14)
Time in New Zealand	>1.0 year	5
	1.0 < >2.0 years	1
	2.0 < >3.0 years	2
	3.0 < >4.0 years	3
	4.0 < >5.0 years	3
Qualifications in NZ ¹	None yet	6
	High school	2
	University foundation course	3
	University 1-2 semesters	4
	Certificate	2
Current subjects	Diploma	1
	Computer-Aided Design (CAD)	5
	Aviation	4
	Travel and tourism	4
	Management/marketing	1

1: More than one category is possible for each participant

Table 6: New Zealand experience of participating students

Students were asked why they were studying their current course. Most said they were interested in the subject; one reported that it related to his future 'dream', one said it would be easy to find a job in the area, one said it would lead to international experience, and another said it was a cheaper than the equivalent course in his home country. They were asked to rate on a five-point scale the relevance of the course for their future. Seven gave the highest rating of relevance (1), two gave the next highest (2) and four gave the middle rating. This lower rating may be a reflection that these four students were taking the course as an alternative pathway to university study, rather than more study at language school (see Section 3.4 below).

Students were further asked to give a rating on a five-point scale for the grades they had received in their courses so far. Five gave the highest rating (1), five gave the next highest (2 or 2.5) and two gave the middle rating (3). Two more students said they had not yet had any grades. This shows that the students' perception was that they were succeeding in their studies at the time they were interviewed.

The students were also asked about the English language courses they had undertaken both in their home countries and in New Zealand. Table 7 shows that all but one had studied English at school; two had studied in English medium schools. One had taken English as part of a university course. In New Zealand, most had studied at language schools (five students) or foundation courses (four courses), but one had undertaken self-study and four had taken no courses. Two students had come through the New Zealand high school system.

Place	Type of study	Number (Max = 14) ¹
Home country	School (primary, secondary)	11
	English medium	2
	Language school	2
	University	1
	None	1
New Zealand	High school	2
	Language school	5
	Foundation course	4
	Self-study	1
	None	4

1: More than one category is possible for each participant

Table 7: English study background of participating students

3.2 Use of the IELTS General Training module

This section describes the responses of participants about the use of the IELTS General Training module as an entry requirement for their course.

Students were asked what English language tests they had sat. Seven had taken IELTS. One of these had also sat TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language – this test has paper-based, computer-based, and internet-based versions but details were not elicited on which variant the student had sat). Another had only taken a TOEFL practice test. One had sat TOIEC (Test of English for International Communication) and two had taken New Zealand’s school exams NCEA Level 2 (National Certificate of Educational Achievement). Three had not sat any English language tests – in two cases because their schooling had been in English-medium, and in another because they had not been required by the institution.

Of the seven students who had taken IELTS, all had taken the Academic module. One could not remember but reported taking it as part of a university foundation course, so it can be assumed this was also the Academic module. A follow-up question asked why they had taken the particular module. Three reported having taken the Academic module for entrance to university, and one because that was the one everyone took. One reported taking it for their study visa (although the study visa does not have language requirements per se, but requires that institution entry requirements are met).

The choice of Academic module means that students have the option of taking a range of courses, including university courses, whereas taking the General Training module would be more restrictive. Students did not seem to know that their institutions had the General Training module as a possible entry requirement; when some were asked directly, they said they had not checked this.

As reported above, none of the students had taken the IELTS General Training module, and most had little or no knowledge of it. One student was very clear about this:

General Training? I’ve never heard of it. (Student 9)

Some of the participants who were teaching staff members also knew little about it, because decisions were made by others in the institution:

To be honest, it’s not something I’ve been involved with. When the programs are developed and the documentation put together for approval and so forth, there’s consultation with [Learning Support]. (Staff 4)

I’ve never seen them, or sat in on them, or anything. So I just assume that [Learning Support staff] know what they’re talking about. (Staff 5)

Most of the staff knew more about the Academic module than the General one:

...all of them are holding Academic results so I haven't had any experience with [IELTS General Training]. (Staff 7)

I don't know the composition of them. I've seen a few Academic ones I think –I mean as an entry criteria. That is a General test that we can hopefully rely on for some indication of the level of English that they can speak and understand. (Staff 3)

I've had a bit of discussion with [Learning Services] about the equivalency of the General Training versus the Academic tests, and just trying to get some guidance on that as well... It's not something I really fully understand or feel totally au fait with at all. (Staff 4)

One staff participant reported that they had changed from Academic to General Training as a pre-requisite in one course (while retaining it in others):

In that particular course we were having trouble with students struggling, because there's a lot of reading in those classes. (Staff 5)

One student's comments may have reflected a widespread view, particularly since the entry criteria were usually set at a lower level than for the Academic module:

I think it's easier than Academic. (Student 8)

Some staff were clear that a low English language entry level was appropriate in the context of their courses:

I think some would consider [the level for our courses] to be reasonably low. I think some of the rationale behind it was that the type of material we're dealing with – which is, well, it's predominantly computer-based, application-based, practical hands-on. Especially for the Certificate in CAD (computer-aided design) – not so much in the theory lecture-type stuff – that we can accommodate lower scores, lower abilities, in their English. (Staff 4)

Basically it's a level that's used for most vocational training courses within [our institution], so we are trying to get some level playing field I suppose, so that not everyone's got a different one which makes it very confusing. So you'll find I think that General Training 5.5 is more or less similar in all the vocational training courses. (Staff 3)

The General Training module was associated with its use in immigration:

I do [know there are two modules], but I don't quite understand the difference... I know students have to provide IELTS General module results for their Permanent Residence application. (Staff 7)

The immigration context was the only one another staff member knew of, and she was surprised to hear that her institution accepted the General Training module:

I know that it's got two forms because several years ago I think some people want to immigrate to New Zealand, they have to pass General 6 or General 6.5 – I can't remember very clearly, but I definitely know they've got to pass. (Staff 10)

Another staff member did have knowledge of the General Training module, and described problems with both modules of the Test:

And what we found is, that when they provided their IELTS results (and not all of them did do IELTS testing), we found that the IELTS results bore no resemblance in many cases – it would be around 90% of the cases – to the actual IELTS level that they were at. Usually it was 0.5 to (in some cases) 1.5 lower than the IELTS test showed. And that would be on a consistent basis. Especially from China.

And in the end, we couldn't rely on it at all, the IELTS results that they had. So that threw the programs and their language level into havoc, because we're reliant on an accurate score. And we are talking General, not Academic, although it didn't matter – it's immaterial whether it was an Academic rating or a General IELTS rating, it was not particularly relevant – we just wanted some indication of a level which reflected what it said on the certificate that they got.

For three years, actually it would be in most places, and that would include Thailand and the Philippines, but it was mostly Chinese. It was quite clear that there were Chinese in particular, but there were others, who were going to a cram school to learn how to sit an IELTS test and to do well on an IELTS test. But it bore very little resemblance to the actual IELTS level that they claimed that they were at. They were invariably – they were almost in all cases – lower.

When they came to a course like ours, and started to be introduced into the course and start doing the training – and the two areas that were the weakest were speaking and listening. And they are the most important ones for the kinds of work, the training, that they are doing and the work opportunity that they're looking for.

So in the end, the blanket conclusion we came to [was] that we would not rely on the IELTS certificate at all. And so we developed our own assessment system and we used that – regardless of whether they have an IELTS certificate or not. (Staff 14)

In many cases, these results show a lack of awareness of the General Training module, and where there is awareness, they indicate some lack of support for its use.

3.3 The IELTS General Training as a predictor of success

This section outlines participants' ideas about the extent to which the IELTS General Training module predicts success in tertiary programs, including whether any of the individual Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing scores are critical in predicting success. Also of interest was how the English proficiency score interacts with other non-language program pre-requisites.

The seven students who had taken IELTS were asked for their scores on the Test: two had received 5.5, three 6.0 and three 6.5. The sub-scores ranged from 4.5 to 7. They were then asked to rank the usefulness of IELTS for their current course, on a five-point scale. Of the seven students for whom this applied, one gave it the highest rating (1), three gave it the next highest rating (2), one gave it a middle rating (3.5), and two gave it a low rating (4). None gave it the lowest rating. This fairly unenthusiastic response may be because the students had taken the Test hoping to gain entrance to university, with one of two results. Either they had not had a high enough score so had taken a vocational course instead of further English language study, or they had received an adequate score but had not succeeded in university study so had transferred to a vocational course. This was explained by one of the staff in the interviews:

They come to New Zealand, to a language school, and try to get IELTS. Fifty per cent of students can't be bothered spending two years [to get a high enough score]. So instead of that pathway, they try a language school, then a diploma, then university. Their friends say university is too hard, too expensive. (Staff 9)

A feeling was expressed by some staff that other skills were just as important as English language ability in vocational and technical courses:

Well we haven't really seen a great deal of difference between students who have completed 5.5 and who have come in on special admissions, for instance. We often find that life skills are probably just as important as English speaking and comprehension skills on something like what we're doing... Maturity, I suppose, you know, someone who's a bit more mature, motivated to learn, I mean they're often just as important as good English literacy skills.

...English comprehension's important too because there's a lot of theory of baking during the one-year course... There's a bit of reading involved, comprehension... You see, our main challenge from experience, you know, having done this for many years – is that it's not so much English comprehension, but jargon. And it's not just jargon, it's also colloquialisms that we use in New Zealand – ingredients that overseas students are unfamiliar with, products that overseas students have never seen. You know it's really those things that challenge the students more I think, than the actual English. (Staff 3)

I think what we find quite often is that even if someone doesn't have particularly good English skills, we're able to get past that and find the other skills and knowledge and so forth and work around the language problems. So no, I guess thinking about it more that way there wouldn't be a hard and fast correlation. There are some students who don't have particularly good English but have very good technical skills and technical knowledge and they're able to succeed that way. (Staff 4)

Knowledge of content-specific vocabulary was identified by one participant as more important than a level of general English:

Students are at pre-intermediate level although their [sport] vocab is high, and they seem to have no problem. (Staff 12)

One staff member pointed out that although they were sometimes concerned about students coping, this was partly as a result of cultural learning styles:

The majority of them cope reasonably well. There's a few that we sometimes wonder whether they've passed their exams or not, but the majority of them seem to cope OK... Sometimes it's a cultural thing, that they don't like talking you know, some cultures they listen and don't like being asked questions and you're never quite sure if they understood what you asked them or not. (Staff 6)

There were some comments relating to the difference between international students and permanent resident students (who do not have a language entry requirement):

We've got one Swiss guy who's a New Zealand citizen. So you see he'd got PR [permanent residence] so he didn't have to go through IELTS... So every now and then he would struggle a little bit with writing. (Staff 6)

There's currently an IELTS requirement of 5.5, but we are looking at taking it out because we never use it and there is no way of enforcing it. Some recent international students have had poor levels of English, but they've been doing English courses at the same time anyway. (Staff 2)

In some cases, the acceptance process was reported as clear and straightforward:

Basically you know we have the benchmark, we get the scores, and if they pass the scores... If in some cases – we've had a few – we've had the requirements where they have an overall score, but also a proviso they don't get below a certain amount in the sub-tests. And we've had a few that have come through with sufficient overall score but they might have dipped out in one those sub-tests. And in that case we then go to a sort of special admission process and start bringing in the likes of [Student Learning] to give us a recommendation of whether we can or can't – shouldn't – go ahead with the particular student. (Staff 4)

However, in another case, problems were reported with managing the institution's policy around language entry requirements:

We say they need an overall band of 6.0 IELTS...but we don't even ask to see an IELTS! We don't interview them, they just arrive... Our difficulty is that they need more funding because they run out of money because of their flight time out there. And that's where the difficulty is – understanding instructions from the flight tower, so it's taking them twice as long to get through as the domestic students. (Staff 15)

In other cases the link between language entry requirements and commercial realities was made clear:

Impossible to have a requirement. In Korea [our target students] are professionals...we could not get students. (Staff 11)

We were happy with the four skill areas that exist, but we found that we needed to assess them further, and actually identify competencies within the skill areas, and that identified more specific areas of development that they needed to engage in...

If we [raised the pre-requisites] then they see that as a barrier and they recognise that they couldn't possibly get there. We've actually had to raise it in some cases – generally we've had to raise it 0.5 IELTS to try and compensate for that. But if we went much higher than that, most would see that as beyond their capabilities, and so they wouldn't even consider coming. (Staff 14)

Some scepticism was expressed about the reliability of the IELTS Test:

IELTS is inconsistent, there is a difference within the bands...students are stressed, nervous. It doesn't tell attendance, or study skills. (Staff 9)

We sometimes find that students who come with IELTS 5.5 have actually poorer English than the students who haven't got IELTS 5.5. But having said that, students who have IELTS 5.5. have sometimes got better English than some of the local students who have got Level 1 English [NCEA Level 1 (see Section 1.1)]. So it's very difficult to say that, you know, a test will correlate to a student completing the course and being able to get through all the written assessment requirements...

We don't basically put a huge onus on – you know, I mean it's an entry requirement that they need to have if they've got English as another language, but we don't put it – or say; 'You've got it, so you must be better' sort of thing. We never, we can't, we've learned not to be able to make assumptions basically. So we take everyone as they come and actually run through and work out what their capabilities might be still, and work from there. (Staff 3)

One staff member emphasised the importance of getting the entry levels set appropriately:

...Two years ago...we increased the level slightly...Those that were just scraping through were having serious difficulty in our courses...I think generally that, having got the level right, we seem to be happy with what's happening and the type of student we're getting.
(Staff 5)

The workplace was also used as a benchmark:

When they come over here, those that are registered nurses in their home country the first step is they need to get their language level up to 5.5 to be able to work in New Zealand – that's a General IELTS of 5.5, that's their first objective. Actually it's not to get immigration, it's to get a job – we know that they need to be at 5.5 to get a job offer. We know that, we've identified that, that's something that's understood – a workplace reality. Because Immigration New Zealand are not overly concerned, depending on what it is they're applying for, as long as they get a job offer, they're satisfied that will satisfy the language level needed...However, for the nursing it is a requirement of the Nursing Council of New Zealand to reach an IELTS of 7.0 which is extremely high, for obvious reasons – if you're in an emergency you've got to be able to communicate and hear very efficiently.

How it works is, they get a job as a caregiver at 5.5 and they can work for – it might be one, two, maybe three years. To then attempt through the workplace environment and extra language training that could be provided by an institution, including ourselves, to get them up to 7.0 – then they have to sit an IELTS test to verify the 7.0. (Staff 14)

Before we've always said, 'Well, if you've got residency, we're going to accept that your English language is probably going to be fine because you will have had to have done this test and got a certain point average in that test in order to get residency'. But then, recently, it seems that they're not getting enough people applying from their preferred source so they've increased the quota for (probably for) Pacific Islanders (or whatever), which has meant that there's been a large influx of people without language skills. (Staff 8)

However, in other cases, the Test was rarely used:

I think we [used IELTS as a pre-requisite] once. In the early days it wasn't in place, so the Japanese guy just got in anyway. Since then the educational level and English capabilities and capacity has been able to be gauged by their academic transcripts and results and through actually dialoguing with them, phone conversations and so forth.

Now for example our Norwegian, we thought she might have to do it, but between Norway and Sweden and Denmark there's this special category which says if they've passed the equivalent of such and such a level at high school, which is the same as our Year 13 here – if they've passed their English at that level, that's the same as doing an IELTS at a certain level.
(Staff 6)

One response was to suspend enrolment until the students had achieved an adequate standard:

With international students I now will send them a letter of offer, but on the letter there's a huge section about the language. And if we feel they're not up to scratch, we will say, 'Now you have to go off to an English language school and come back in three months' time'. And we keep their place open for them (mandatory at their own cost). (Staff 15)

These responses therefore highlighted some of the complexities around the use of a test such as the IELTS General Training module to predict success in courses.

3.4 Other language-related factors

This section describes the other language-related factors that are involved in student successes in their program. For example, the language support provided, productive and receptive language requirements in the course, and methods of assessment. Also, the relationship of these with non-language factors such as content-related skills and experiences.

Students were asked to rate how easy they had found the English on their courses, on a five-point scale. Most have high ratings: four gave them the highest rating (1 or 1.5), five gave them the next highest rating (2 or 2.5), and five gave them the middle rating (3). The ratings for reading, writing, speaking and listening followed the same pattern, although with a few lower ratings for reading and writing. One newly arrived student mentioned a problem with understanding the New Zealand accent, and another student mentioned difficulties with subject-specific vocabulary.

They were also asked if they had received any help from outside the course. Seven said they had not, one mentioning that they could use a dictionary for any difficulties. Three mentioned that they had previously had help from homestay families or school mates, and two reported currently receiving help from homestay families. One reported asking for help from someone he met in his part-time job, two reported trying to practise English with native speakers, and one reported practising English through internet chatting and gaming.

The general academic abilities of people taking the technical or vocational courses was linked to achievement in some cases:

Because a lot of people in agriculture generally are poor readers...we tend to have the lower end of the academic ability. (Staff 8)

Currently we are at tail end of a bulge [from China], and they are not the brightest...they want PR [permanent residence]. They start wanting a degree, then once they are here they change to wanting PR. (Staff 9)

There are certainly elements where they have lots of opportunity to work through material – written material – on their own, in their own time, and some manage to do that. Some of them do strike difficulties in a sort of a lecture-type situation, and so you go through, you know, spend an hour demonstrating and showing and they are coming up and asking to show it again, because they just haven't picked (it) up, or missed something, or got lost. (Staff 4)

In other cases, personal motivation and approaches to learning were identified as an important factor for success:

For those with the self-confidence to not let language become a barrier, they still participate fully and allow the difficulties of language to be almost a strength...Like the comic side of things, when you can't express yourself exactly how you'd like to they find alternatives, but with one or two of them, it just depends on their personality, how they cope with that moment of being lost for words, as it were. You can either kick yourself – beat yourself over the head for not being capable, or you can use your weakness as a strength...

I think it's just a complicated set of skills – not complicated, I mean a mixture of skills – that help people get through and benefit from this course, and linguistic skills can be a barrier but they don't need to be a barrier depending on the personality, really. (Staff 6)

Homestays with Korean families, but connections [with other Kiwis] are quite limited. They focus on comfort – food, and church. (Staff 12)

There were different staff responses towards students spending time in their same language groups:

What we do tend to find is that because we've had traditionally large numbers of students they tend to work together – clump together. And we've found that to be really quite good in terms of the support – peer support...pretty much in their language groups. (Staff 4)

We provide a very little room upstairs – not providing, they choose it, the Japanese choose to go in that room – but the interesting thing is so do the students from Bahrain, and Chinese and whatever [also] choose to go in that room. So they do say they're speaking English...

I've spoken at length with them – I don't like them being in that little room and they're actually making a big room downstairs so they're going to have to mix very shortly (next year). They're not going to be able to do it. It's just a real issue with the language. (Staff 15)

A number of staff reported the adaptation of teaching methods, materials, and assessment forms:

It's a mixture of written, and it's a mixture of practical. The practical side with the motivated students is usually not a problem for them to get through if they're willing to put time into practice, etc etc. The written side can be a little bit of a challenge to some of them, especially things like multiple choice questions often throw them. True-false questions is another one that they find difficult. So what we've done is during the years we've refined it so that we don't use them as much. We often find that the marrying between theory and practice sometimes is a bit difficult for them to do. You often find that it takes a longer time for them to do that because they're having to comprehend the language, as well as to understand the concepts and then to put them into how it relates to what they're doing in the practical scenario basically. And we often find that sometimes it takes a little bit longer for them to click on to how things, you know, come together. But once they've got it, I mean they're basically away. (Staff 3)

We give them reference notes and things for various courses – printed things. There's often requirements to do a bit of research on-line, on the internet and so forth, but a lot of it is actually using the applications in a practical sense. And for one thing a number of the computer applications are available in other languages, so they can use our English version here, and use their traditional Chinese or simplified Chinese versions elsewhere. Same functionality, but just different user interface. So there's a few that do that. (Staff 4)

But the way that our courses are developed, people with a practical bent will not have to have the same academic level to get through them. Just because of the way our notes have been written. For instance, all of our notes have been written for the average 12-year-old. And we do have a thing called the SMOG test on all of our notes [SMOG – Simplified Measure of Gobbledegook gives a readability level of written material. See www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/SMOG.html]. It basically tests the reading level of the notes. It's about how many big words you've got next to each other in one sentence and that type of thing. So you run them through a SMOG test and you come out with a reading age. (Staff 8)

After each performance project they have to self-reflect and they have to analyse the material that they've just performed – analyse its components and so forth and self-reflect on their personal learning in that process of making it. Two different kinds of reflective writing to do – we're not so worried about grammar and things in those contexts, we're more concerned

about transparency of their work, reflective learning that's happening. They do that to all different degrees of achievement. (Staff 6)

Extra levels of support by teachers for ESL students were identified as important by several participants:

I have had some problems with students' English understanding, but it's not a big issue, I think, for their study, 'cause all of our tutors are really patient and speak slowly. So if that class is having several international students, the tutor will put the teaching program slowly you know...keeping asking for feedback from the international students, 'Do you understand?' Or, 'If you don't understand, please ask'. So I don't think it's a big issue for them. (Staff 7)

When they get the assignment paper or some kind of research, [and] they're not so clear about the question – I mean they don't know what the question asks – I may explain it to them. (Staff 10)

In addition, extra English classes were provided by some institutions:

English classes here are extra to the course [and paid by the college]. Parents want that, and the college thinks they need it...writing papers in their second year. (Staff 11)

In the mornings they are doing the ACE [Aged Care Education] courses, but in the afternoons they're doing English language training. It's actually English for healthcare – targeted at a medical – it's a medical theme. In the morning we have to have registered nurses teaching the program. In the afternoon we have English language teachers teaching them, but they've had to be schooled up on the terms.

We have to verify that a person is at 5.5 at the completion of the course. And we do that with our own system. What we're really talking about is a 5.5 equivalent. But we have to show it, we can't use IELTS scores, we just can only talk about equivalence and we have a description for each of the skill areas.

We've had some feedback – most of it's positive. If they're not at the sufficient level, well, they won't offer them a job. (Staff 14)

Pacific Islanders can get residency without having to sit the test...Quite often they're linked to church groups, and they'll go around and they'll be doing garden maintenance or tree-felling or something for people around the community...We did train a number of people a few weeks ago and it was difficult...I think they had some sort of industrial accident. [Some people from the Pacific Islands] actually came over and were doing some work, and something went wrong. And [the Department of Labour] said: 'These guys should really have a chainsaw certificate if they are going in the community and doing chainsaw work'...I did say that we had issues with the language, because we don't have multilingual tutors – it's not one of our requirements. But they said, 'We'll send a translator'. (Staff 8)

Another staff member wished that English classes could be provided by the institution:

[The tutors] really say the 52 weeks is full on – there's no [time]. It would be wonderful to have something here...I would be very reluctant in all the schools I know around [this city] to actually send [students] to – that would be most effective. I feel they need specific language. (Staff 15)

Finally, specific activities to integrate overseas students were also mentioned:

The last four or five years, what we do is we always run an extra day in the first week which is like an orientation day. And we do it for all the students, regardless of whether they have English as a second or other language or not, because we do get young students who come here who have never boiled water before. And so what we do is we take out all the equipment and we go through, you know, what the whisk does and stuff like that. And we also take a whole range of ingredients so that there's an ingredient recognition sort of activity. And in there we throw in a few sort of obscure ingredients that the Kiwis have never seen, and so it gives them a bit more of a, you know, a respect for each other's cultures. (Staff 3)

In summary, these responses indicated that efforts made by staff to meet the particular learning needs of their students, or efforts by students to overcome the barriers of language difficulties, could be just as important as their language levels per se.

3.5 Student perceptions of IELTS

This section describes the students' own perceptions of IELTS, their language proficiency, and language-related and non-language factors relating to IELTS.

The seven students who had taken IELTS were asked to rate its fairness as a test of their English ability, on a five-point scale. Two gave it the highest rating (1), three gave it the middle rating (3), and two gave it a low rating (4). Most did not differentiate between the fairness of the sub-tests, although there were some critical comments:

I think for IELTS very complicated – hard – to test the students' English level, like the Speaking just for the [examiners] their own idea make the score. And I feel, I think that if they are not happy today or if they are testing the student, then maybe the score is not very good, I think. (Student 2)

Actually, I think it's not quite fair in Reading test. Sometimes it's true-false or tick or cross that things just makes people sometimes do the wrong answers. That time just true-false questions but I write down the tick or cross so whole question's wrong. These things a little bit confuse people. Actually, I think the questions are fair, just sometimes the answers just write down wrongly so makes the score become a little bit lower. (Student 3)

Other criticisms were made of the reliability of the Test results:

I don't know, I don't think it's very accurate. It doesn't really show your skills. It's just like – some of my mates used to go to language schools, and like before they sit the IELTS test they just took testings every day and they get used to it. So all the listening, you know, they give you all the samples. like tests from previous years, you just sit them. (Student 9)

It wasn't that much hard to be honest. I needed it for university. (Student 6)

The validity of IELTS in the context of their current courses was mentioned by some students:

I think that sometimes maybe [because] our course is CAD (Computer Aided Design), [we] do not use much English, so it's hard to know. (Student 2)

IELTS is pretty hard. It's good for reports – engineering, law or medicine. But for AutoCAD (computer aided design) I don't think it can really help me, I don't need to do many reports. (Student 5)

I reckon they need to make it more practical, rather than more academic. (Student 9)

There were also some criticisms of non-language factors:

Out here it's also expensive. (Student 4)

Some of these indicated that the students needed better information about IELTS resources and the testing procedures:

I think IELTS should give us some material about the test because if now we take the test I think we don't know the content of the materials... The Chinese students they bring the materials from China. Before I just asked my Mum to send me some books from China... Some [in] Chinese, some [in] English. (Student 7)

It is useful because for residency you need to have IELTS test, you need to go through this test... My consultant told me that if you need residency here, you must pass the test. Because out here it's very difficult... The standard's a bit higher here. I'm told that IELTS does... [indistinguishable word]... marking. In India [if] the level's a little bit low, you can raise it there. (Student 4)

Other English language tests were compared with IELTS, both favourably and unfavourably:

(Don't tell the other students!) Just make it harder. The IELTS is not that much hard like compared to the TOEFL. The TOEFL is much harder – you have to write everything and – not more like TOEFL, I like the way the exam will turn out. It should be like – OK the reading is so fine, it's hard enough, but speaking, writing, listening – it's not that much hard. (Student 6)

TOIEC is too easy if people stay overseas – especially listening will be very easy. (Student 14)

These comments showed a range of opinions about IELTS, and indicated opportunities for IELTS to increase levels of information about the Test.

3.6 Staff perceptions of IELTS

Finally, general staff perceptions of IELTS are outlined in this section. The comments made by staff were, in fact, very similar to the comments made by the students.

There was some criticism of the predictability of the Test, and the ability of students to practise for the Test:

Maybe because the students know IELTS a lot, sometimes they can guess what the IELTS questions will be in the IELTS exam, especially the writing questions. So maybe IELTS should give them more choice – I mean more questions to choose. (Staff 10)

Additional criticisms were made of the reliability of the Test:

I have found some inconsistencies in the interpretation of some of the test results, whereas I would consider two people to be at the same level on an assessment system, when they were assessed, particularly between two assessors from two different countries, the differences were marked. Could be 0.5 to 1.0 up. And so I then started to look – there's no more information of course, there's purely the scores – but I then asked myself the question and I've done some of my own research – how much moderation is done among assessors at any given time if there's a battery of IELTS tests being conducted? And how much moderation is

there between countries, say two countries, and their assessors, for consistency? I don't know – there probably is some, but it's a question I have. (Staff 14)

I guess, to make a broad statement, we probably view the IELTS [scores] slightly sceptically – not sceptically, but you know just with, you know, not quite sure with the veracity of them, just exactly how robust they are. But you know, I've had some kids come in with pretty average IELTS scores and on meeting them find them to be quite straightforward. Other, the converse, you know, they come in with reasonable IELTS but there's a real barrier there. So really, we just have to take things as we see them. (Staff 4)

However, a more positive response was made by one staff member:

I think compared with my experience, IELTS is very popular in China [now] as I know, because six years ago I didn't know IELTS at all in China. But the students who come here in recent years they know IELTS quite a lot – and some of them already sat the IELTS test when they were in China. So I think IELTS is quite good. (Staff 10)

There were also some criticisms about the nature of the Test:

Speaking tests make the students nervous – it's hard in a one-off test to get the real level. (Staff 12)

And then the nature of the tests themselves... The degree of difficulty escalates too soon on into the test – some of the samples that I've seen, some of the tests that I've seen – the degree of difficulty is far too early in the testing regime. I can think of a number of examples, but when I read about hopscotch in English, and they're expected to ask questions about a busy railway station in London – you know, I'm afraid that just appalls me. And you're actually delivering it to Asians of which experience are completely...

To do a graph interpretation of foot traffic and be able to write about it, even talk about it, but write about it – that's a difficult exercise when you're doing it in English for many people. When it's with people who have limited English language, that's an almost impossible exercise and one which is beyond comprehension when you actually don't even relate it to an area that they are familiar with... especially for many, particularly in China, who have never travelled outside China. (Staff 14)

The idea of vocational and technical courses as an alternative pathway to university was raised again:

[For] most Chinese international students their first choice is nearly always university. (Staff 7)

They start wanting a degree, then once they're here they change to wanting PR [permanent residence] ...they're not ready to go back to China. (Staff 9)

The study by Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007, p 22) reinforces these findings:

Before they arrived, many participants were unaware of the high standards of English language required for university entrance, and had therefore under-estimated the time required to achieve entrance qualifications... Many students had to study in New Zealand for longer and their study plan cost them [more] than they had expected; this outcome meant that students had to alter their study plans in order to gain entrance to universities and polytechnics.

Similar non-language factors were expressed by some staff as had been expressed by students:

It is run only at certain times – it's not flexible in terms of opportunities to sit an IELTS test – so it's inconvenient to the time at which people want to check, so we just found that it was easier to do ours which we can do at any time. (Staff 14)

It's expensive for many students, and for many students it's too expensive. (Staff 14)

One staff member had had personal experience with sitting IELTS:

Quite fair, because I took the IELTS test when I'd been here only three months, so I was not so confident about IELTS. I was planning to study in a language school six months but at the end of June [the university] got a foundation course and I may go there, so I said, 'Maybe I can have a try'. So I just went to the IELTS and did it – so I'm lucky! I only need to get 5.5. (Staff 10)

Finally, one staff member mentioned the need for competition in the market of language provision:

I understand that the IELTS tests are field tested and it's nice to be part of that field testing... My final comment is that IELTS needs a bit of competition! IELTS is the only one that really exists [in New Zealand]. (Staff 14)

These comments again showed an opportunity for IELTS to provide more information to the staff and students about IELTS in general, and the Academic and General Training modules in particular.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The information provided by the staff and students in the interviews for this study showed that the IELTS General Training module was not well-known, and few people had personal experience of this version of the Test, particularly in vocational or technical tertiary settings. As a result, rather than assessing the degree to which it can predict performance in a vocational program, the study's focus shifted to reasons the General Training module is not used more widely in these institutions.

There were a number of influences on why the General Training module is not used more widely in tertiary settings, even though it is well-known in other situations such as immigration. The technical and vocational tertiary sector in Aotearoa New Zealand is extremely fluid; as it is a small part of the total export education market, it seems particularly vulnerable to influences from outside factors, such as the exchange rate and educational trends in overseas countries which result in waves of students from countries like China or India. Small tertiary providers can be particularly responsive to these trends, with the result that there is a high level of opening up and closing down of institutions. In addition, there are changes within the institutions as they decide whether or not to take international students (with associated compliance costs from the mandatory Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care for International Students). These changes affect the levels of institutional knowledge within the providers – especially small providers – about English language tests such as IELTS.

There was much more awareness of the Academic module than the General Training one. Some students had taken the Academic module intending to study at degree level, but did not meet the language ability levels and were taking vocational or technical courses as a result. Others started degree courses but transferred to their current institution after failing, or finding the courses difficult. Some of these students indicated that they eventually wished to return to university study. The 'multiple pathways' which some students make have also been highlighted in the case of Chinese students in Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007, p 18). Students in our study were, in some cases, unaware of their institution's regulations allowing the General Training module as an entry

requirement. The students associated the Academic module with all education purposes of IELTS. Any knowledge of the General Training module was in the context of immigration.

There was some confusion about visa requirements which may have been as a result of misinformation or misunderstandings with immigration consultants in their home countries. Some students reported that they needed the Academic module for their student visa but in fact the requirement is an offer of study from an institution (which may require a certain IELTS score).

Some teaching staff were not involved in the institution's decision-making about English language entry requirements. In larger institutions this was because decisions were made centrally and staff relied on the institution's ESL specialists to help them make decisions about language matters such as entry levels. In some smaller institutions the decisions had been made by former staff and inherited by current staff who tended to have no specialist knowledge about English language testing issues.

Some institutions did not have English language entry requirements, or did not enforce the ones they had. In some cases this was because the staff had found few English language problems and were able to teach in small classes with high levels of interaction with the students, or they had been able to adapt the courses to meet the specific needs of students with English as a second language. The importance of teachers reflecting on their practice and adapting to the needs of international students was highlighted in McCallum's study (2004, p 43). In other cases, staff pointed out that particularly for vocational or technical courses the students' motivation and life skills were just as important as English language ability. This is in line with previous IELTS studies which stressed the importance of other factors such as motivation in success for international students (Cotton and Conrow, 1998, p 110; Kerstjens and Nery, 2000, p 85). Some participants reported that imposing English language entry requirements would have a negative effect on student enrolments. Where English language was identified as a problem, institutions tended to provide English language support, or sometimes first language support (eg interpreters).

As reported by Read and Hirsh (2005, p 36), an increasing trend is for institutions to prefer their own diagnostic tests (albeit sometimes modeled on IELTS) or other assessment methods in conjunction with interviews. Where this was happening at the institutions in our study, the participants indicated that this was because they felt their own assessment was more reliable and/or targeted to the specific needs of their programs, for which life skills or specific subject knowledge were, in some cases, regarded as equally important to academic or English language skills.

In addition, some institutions had changed their entry requirements from General Training to Academic modules. In some cases, this was because they had responded to Industry Training Organisation regulations requiring the Academic module for industry registration, although these do not apply to the training programs themselves. In other cases, they had responded to student problems in managing the English language content of the course, particularly reading.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The main recommendation is that IELTS work on awareness raising about the General Training module as an option for vocational and technical program entry requirements:

- among students intending to enter the vocational education and training sector in New Zealand
- among tertiary providers in the vocational education and training sector
- among the Industry Training Organisations, who set standards for graduating students.

One possibility might be the inclusion of more information on the IELTS website. This could help to clarify issues around differences between the Academic and General Training modules, and the relationship of IELTS to issues such as entry levels and visa requirements. In addition, it would be useful for more explanation of the processes IELTS undertakes to enhance reliability and validity of test results, for example in Examiner moderation.

The constant changes for the providers in the sector mean that this awareness raising needs to be an ongoing task. In the institutions we visited, many of the staff were keen to engage on the issues of language testing which indicates some opportunities for IELTS to explain and promote their product.

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- the students who took part in interviews for their willingness to share their backgrounds and opinions
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APPENDIX 1: INSTITUTION INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

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18 September 2006

INFORMATION SHEET FOR INSTITUTIONS

Language Study

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to discuss my research. I am an independent researcher currently carrying out a study for IELTS (the International English Language Testing System). This is a joint-funded project for Cambridge ESOL, the British Council, and IELTS Australia (Round 11).

The project is investigating how the IELTS General Training Module predicts student performance in tertiary programs. I am also interested in finding out other language-related factors involved in success in your programs, and student and staff perceptions of these factors.

The purpose of this initial interview is:

- to get an overview of language issues at your institution, particularly relating to language testing
- to discuss the possibility of further involvement in the study by staff and/or students at your institution.

Your participation is of course voluntary, and any information other than that which is publicly available will be confidential to me and the project's statistical adviser, Professor Stephen Haslett at Massey University. All information will be presented anonymously in the research report, and no individual person or institution will be able to be identified. In this project I am bound by the ethical protocols for applied linguists as outlined on http://www.baal.org.uk/about_goodpractice_full.pdf. I will send a copy of the results to you when the project is completed.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries.

With thanks

Dr Hilary Smith
hilary_smith@xtra.co.nz

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Language study

I have been given, and have understood, an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may withdraw myself (or any information that I have provided) from this project at any time before data analysis is complete, without having to give reasons.

I understand that any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and advisers. The published results will not use my name, and no opinions will be attributed to me in any way that will identify me. I understand that the tape recordings of interviews will be electronically wiped at the end of the project.

I understand that the data I provide will not be used for any other purpose or released to others without my written consent.

I understand that I will receive a summary of the results of the research on its completion.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signed: _____

Name (please print): _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 2: STAFF INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

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18 September 2006

INFORMATION SHEET FOR STAFF

Language Study

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to discuss my research. I am an independent researcher currently carrying out a study for IELTS (the International English Language Testing System). This is a joint-funded project for Cambridge ESOL, the British Council, and IELTS Australia (Round 11).

The project is investigating how the IELTS General Training Module predicts student performance in tertiary programs. I am also interested in finding out other language-related factors involved in success in your programs, and student and staff perceptions of these factors.

The purpose of this interview is:

- to get an overview of language issues on your course
- to hear your views about IELTS tests, especially the General Training Module.

Your participation is of course voluntary, and any information other than that which is publicly available will be confidential to me and the project's statistical adviser, Professor Stephen Haslett at Massey University. All information will be presented anonymously in the research report, and no individual person or institution will be able to be identified. In this project I am bound by the ethical protocols for applied linguists as outlined on http://www.baal.org.uk/about_goodpractice_full.pdf. I will send a copy of the results to you when the project is completed.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries.

With thanks

Dr Hilary Smith
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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Language study

I have been given, and have understood, an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may withdraw myself (or any information that I have provided) from this project at any time before data analysis is complete, without having to give reasons.

I understand that any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and advisers. The published results will not use my name, and no opinions will be attributed to me in any way that will identify me. I understand that the tape recordings of interviews will be electronically wiped at the end of the project.

I understand that the data I provide will not be used for any other purpose or released to others without my written consent.

I understand that I will receive a summary of the results of the research on its completion.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signed: _____

Name (please print): _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 3: STAFF INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview schedule for staff

- 1 What is your position at the college?
- 2 How many students do you have enrolled?
- 3 How many ESOL students?
- 4 What are the (educational, ethnic, etc) backgrounds of the students?
- 5 What tests do you use for entry to your courses?
- 6 Why?
- 7 What are the advantages and disadvantages of the tests you use?
- 8 How familiar are you with the different modules of the IELTS test (Academic and GTM)?
- 9 Do you have any comments about them?
- 10 How well do the students cope with the English language on your courses?
- 11 Do you have any English language support for the courses?
- 12 Are there any language issues you have had to deal with on your courses?
- 13 Do you have any other comments?

APPENDIX 4: STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

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20 September 2006

INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENTS **Language Study**

Thank you for meeting with me. I am carrying out a study for IELTS (the International English Language Testing System) about the IELTS General Training Module. The purpose of this interview is to hear about your experiences with IELTS, and any ideas you have about IELTS.

All information you give me will be confidential, and in my report there will be no names of you (or your institution).

I will send you a copy of the results when the study is finished.

Please email me if you have any questions, or any other comments.

With thanks

Dr Hilary Smith
hilary_smith@xtra.co.nz

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH **Language study**

I have read, and understood, an explanation of this study.

I understand that all information will be kept confidential and that no names will be written in the report.

I understand that the tape recordings of interviews will be destroyed at the end of the project, and that I will receive a summary of the results of the research when it is finished.

I agree to participate in this research.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Name (please print): _____

Email (to receive results): _____

APPENDIX 5: STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview schedule for students					
[1	What is your sex?]	<i>Interviewer notes answer</i>			
2	What is your age?				
3	What is your country of origin?				
4	What is your first language?				
5	What were your qualifications in your home country?				
6	How long have you been in New Zealand?				
7	What qualifications have you got in New Zealand?				
8	What course are you studying now?				
9	Why are you studying this course?				
10	How relevant is this course for your future, from 1 to 5 where 1 = very good, 5= not at all relevant?				
11	How good are your grades in this course, from 1 to 5 where 1= very good, 5 = very bad?				
12	What English study have you done before this course				
	- in your country?				
	- in New Zealand?				
13	What English test have you taken?				
14	Did you take IELTS Academic or GTM?				
15	Why?				
16	What scores did you get?				
	Reading?	Writing?	Listening?	Speaking?	Overall?
17	Do you think it was a fair test of your English ability, from 1 to 5 where 1 = very fair, 5 = not at all fair:				
	Reading?	Writing?	Listening?	Speaking?	Overall?
18	How useful is IELTS for this course, from 1 to 5 where 1 = very useful, 5 = not all useful?				
19	How easy have you found the English on your course, from 1 to 5 where 1 = very easy, 5= very difficult:				
	Reading?	Writing?	Listening?	Speaking?	Overall?
20	Have you received any help from anyone outside the course?				
21	Do you have any other comments?				