IELTS™

3 A multiple case study of the relationship between the indicators of students' English language competence on entry and students' academic progress at an international postgraduate university

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An investigation into the selection practices and decision making rationales of admissions personnel in an international, postgraduate UK setting and the consequences for borderline non-native English speaking students' academic progress.

ABSTRACT

There is concern in the UK about declining degree standards due to the impact of internationalisation initiatives upon the expanded taught Masters postgraduate sector. Despite interest in the policy and managerial aspects of internationalisation of higher education, few studies have researched selection procedures that might illuminate current practices.

A case study approach was employed to study student selection in various Masters programmes in a postgraduate UK higher education institution specialising in engineering and management. The research revealed various selection processes in operation, some dependent upon English test scores, others reliant upon expert linguist assessments. There were differences between Schools in entry requirements for NNES students and in selection practices. Whatever the process or requirements, there was substantial support for complex, holistic rationales underlying Course Directors' selection decisions. Course Directors took into consideration academic qualifications and interests, motivation, readiness to adapt to UK HE culture, educational background and work experience.

Course Directors were most concerned about students' writing abilities which were difficult to assess reliably on entry and sometimes this resulted in failure to reach the required standard for the thesis. This impacted upon the workloads of thesis supervisors and cast doubts upon the reliability of entry assessments to predict academic writing abilities in this context.

The academic progress of students with borderline English language skills was followed during the year using several measures. Over half of the group was instructed to revise and resubmit their theses. In general, these students performed in line with their initial borderline status until the end of the year. The initial identification of students as borderline appeared sound whichever method was used to assess their language proficiency.

The unusual aspects of the institutional context and the nature of the enquiry discourage generalisation but offer opportunities for further comparative case study research in contrasting settings.

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Gaynor Lloyd-Jones has worked in academic development in higher education for several years, formerly in undergraduate medical education. She was a member of the team that introduced the problem-based learning undergraduate medical curriculum at the University of Liverpool in 1996. For her PhD she conducted an ethnographic study of fresher students on the problem-based learning course. She currently holds a research role in Cranfield University's Centre for Postgraduate Learning and Teaching. Her research interests lie in the postgraduate sector of higher education, situated learning and the relationship between work and academic learning.

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1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

The past decade has seen rising numbers of students seeking degree level study outside their home countries. UNESCO estimates that figures for international students have risen from 1.7 million in 2000 to 2.5 million in 2006. The Institute for International Education (IEE) which currently tracks student numbers across national borders estimates the equivalent figure for 2006/7 to be 2.9 million (IIE website, 2008). Of the eight most popular destination countries for international study, four are English speaking; the US, UK, Australia and Canada. The UK is the second most popular destination for foreign study, taking a 13% share of all international students in 2006/7. Whilst the IEE figures demonstrate variation in international student enrolment between countries and over time, the rising trend is consistent for the UK. Between 2002/3 and 2006/7, the number of enrolled international students in the UK rose from 305,395 to 376,190. The most popular countries of origin for UK international study in 2006/7 were China, India, the US, Germany, France, Ireland, Greece, Malaysia and Nigeria.

These effects of the internationalisation of higher education have been particularly pronounced in the UK where governmental policies have directly, and indirectly, encouraged the expansion of international student numbers. Successive initiatives by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in 1999 and 2006 (Prime Minister's Initiatives 1 and 2) specified target increases in the number of non-UK students studying in UK higher education (DIUS, 2008; British Council, 2008). The targets of PMI1 were exceeded ahead of schedule and PMI2 aims to increase international students by a further 70,000 in 2011. The influx of overseas students has occurred simultaneously with the growth and diversification of the UK higher educational sector and the transfer of funding responsibility from the state to the individual student. However, the accompanying statutory limit on tuition fees for home students has inadvertently introduced an economic incentive for higher educational institutions (HEIs) to seek alternative sources of income and it is probably not coincidental that the same period has seen HEIs developing and implementing internationalisation strategies. Consequently, government policy has indirectly encouraged HEIs to maintain their own financial stability through the pursuit of growing numbers of international students.

In the UK, statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2008) confirm that much of the expansion in international student numbers has taken place in postgraduate programmes. At the start of PMI1 in 1999/2000, the total number of postgraduates studying in the UK was 408,620 of whom 23% were classified as non-UK. For the year 2006/7, postgraduate numbers had risen to 559,390 of whom 8.6% were from the non-UK EU and 24.4% from elsewhere. It is the latter group that have contributed most to the increase, as the percentage of non UK EU students has remained steady since 2002/3 when the separate categories of origin were introduced. Thus, there has been both an absolute and proportional rise in non-UK students over the past nine years. HESA statistics do not, however, differentiate between research and taught postgraduate students but a Higher Education Policy Institute report published in 2004 (Sastry, 2004) demonstrates that the rise in student numbers is directly attributable to international enrolment on taught Masters programmes as postgraduate research student numbers have remained stable during the period covered by the report.

The value of a degree gained in the UK holds attractions for foreign students. As well as the reputation of the UK degree and the quality of higher education, the conferring of a postgraduate degree implies English language proficiency of a high standard; one sufficient to preclude any necessity for formal English language testing in the future. Additionally, the one year duration Masters course compares favourably in terms of cost and time with two year Masters programmes on mainland Europe and elsewhere. As well as the opportunity to improve English language proficiency, the British Council website cites other advantages of UK higher education in the variety of courses available, the

flexibility of study and the multicultural experience of UK postgraduate study where at many universities 'more than 30% students may be international' (British Council, 2008).

However, success in recruiting greater numbers of non-native English speaking (NNES) students into higher education may pose a threat to UK degree standards. This aspect of internationalisation has recently been publicly highlighted in a debate involving the Parliamentary Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the BBC. In an inaugural lecture at the University of Buckingham, Professor Alderman claimed that standards of English literacy were low in UK universities and particularly so for international students whose fees contributed essential revenue. A number of ensuing BBC online articles quoting unnamed academics appeared to support Professor Alderman's view (Coghlan, 2008). However, the QAA, in responding to invitations from the Select Committee, pointed out the difficulties of pursuing and evaluating such claims because open disclosure is protected by confidentiality, consent and legal issues. The QAA added that they were undertaking research into the recruitment and English language abilities of international students (Select Committee, 2008).

Similar debates have arisen in other countries, notably in Australia in the 1990s where there was a comparable influx of NNES students into higher education. Coley (1999) cites contributions from the media and the literature to justify a survey of the English proficiency entry requirements of Australian HEIs. She found a wide variety of sources of evidence in use in Australia at the time and little standardisation between institutions. Claims of apparent discrepancy between selection processes and entry requirements, on the one hand, and reported language proficiency, on the other, call into question the procedures surrounding the selection of NNES students and the forms of evidence upon which selection decisions are based.

1.2   UK university entry requirements for NNES applicants

1.2.1   IELTS test

As part of their admission criteria, UK universities typically require NNES applicants to produce evidence of language skills in the form of formal English test scores. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is the test most frequently cited on university websites and, although alternative tests are accepted, the IELTS is the benchmark against which other test scores are compared. The British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations jointly manage IELTS. IELTS has a worldwide reputation and several years experience of providing a reliable measure of English language ability. It operates through a network of 500 locations in 120 countries around the world and around 6000 organisations have used its services.

In the academic form of IELTS designed for university entry, scores are reported in whole and half numbers which carry qualitative descriptions of the associated language abilities at each level (see Table 1) (IELTS, 2007). IELTS seeks to grade performance, in preference to establishing a particular pass score. Consequently, IELTS urges institutional users to interpret test scores in the light of course demands, their experience of teaching overseas students and a consideration of sub-test scores (IELTS, 2007). In view of this, IELTS therefore leaves to academic stakeholders the responsibility for setting their own entrance requirements in terms of test scores.

However, IELTS has issued guidelines relating test scores to courses categorised by linguistic demand and academic load. Only band score 7.5 is graded as 'acceptable' for the most demanding programmes such as medicine and law, although 7 is 'probably acceptable'. Conversely, 'acceptable' and 'probably acceptable' levels of 6 and 5.5 are suggested as suitable for animal husbandry and catering, which are classified as 'linguistically less demanding training' courses. Courses classified as either more academically or linguistically demanding fall in between this range. From the UK HEI perspective, whether the course guidelines classification adequately reflects the current diverse landscape of UK

Band Score	Qualitative description of capability
7 Good user	Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
6 Competent user	Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
5 Modest user	Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
4 Limited user	Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.

Table 1: IELTS band scores and descriptors (Taken from the IELTS Handbook 2007)

higher education might be questioned following the growth in interdisciplinary courses, the variations in course type (research and taught) and level (under- and postgraduate). However, IELTS issues guidance for institutions or departments wishing to set their own standard of score level which is more appropriate to their own context.

Whilst it would seem desirable to restrict university entrants to a single test for comparison and continuity, this is not practical, so most UK HEIs accept specified alternative tests as evidence of English language proficiency. Some of the more commonly used tests include the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Cambridge ESOL series of Certificates and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Each test has a different structure which makes standardisation difficult but tables of broad equivalence between the scores of different tests are published (Gillett, 2008) and several university websites quote requirements for the various tests. The TOEFL, for instance, exists in two different forms: paper and internet based which reflect emphases on different language skills in each test format. Certain UK HEIs have produced their own English language examination, for example the Test of English for Educational Purposes (TEEP) at the University of Reading and the University of Warwick English Test (WELT).

1.2.2   UK university entrance requirements for English test scores

As we have seen, IELTS recommends scores between 6 and 7.5 for entry to tertiary study and the majority of HEIs conform to these recommendations as searches for institutional requirements on the IELTS website confirm, although 7.5 is only rarely cited and then almost exclusively for medical and veterinary courses. The great majority lie between 6 and 6.5, implying that students possess 'generally effective command of the language'. However, there are a number of institutions which accept lower levels, a few as low as 4.5 (Brown, 2008). The band score 4.5 falls between the Modest user (5) who: 'has partial command of the language' and the Limited user (4) for whom 'basic competence is limited to familiar situations' but who 'is not able to use complex language' (Table 1). It appears that UK HEIs currently accept a wide range of English language proficiency as judged on test score requirements for university entry.

The array of entry test scores may express the contextual sensitivity to disciplinary, programme and institutional diversity which IELTS encourages HEIs to employ when setting test score requirements. That these figures represent broad guidance only is evident when searching individual HEI websites which reveal variation in entry requirements within, as well as between, HEIs. Higher scores and/or specific levels on sub-scores may be demanded for research students, specific programmes and, occasionally, for postgraduate study. The diversity may also be a means of dealing with problems thrown up by dependence upon a fixed score entry requirement such that the degree of change in

underlying measurement is out of proportion to the consequences. This situation is a familiar one in education since it is analogous to pass-fail assessment decisions

There is, however, another explanation for the range of test scores, particularly those at the lower end. Several UK HEIs have embraced internationalisation strategies in which the development of academic English departments features. These departments may participate in selection, be responsible for delivering pre-sessional or foundation courses and provide ongoing support during degree study. Pre-sessional courses aim to ensure that students with borderline entry scores attain the required proficiency at the start of the programme and go someway to explaining why UK HEIs accept lower entry test scores. It is worth noting that students who participate in pre-sessional course at their admitting institution are not always required to sit a formal English test at the end of the period of language study. Furthermore, it has been estimated that an improvement of one band score requires full time study of 200-300 hours (Gillett, 2008).

The purpose of this brief review of UK HEI entry requirements is to draw a broad brush picture of the current state of regulation and guidance in the area. It is not intended to provide comprehensive coverage of the entry requirements for UK tertiary education. The wide range of acceptable English test scores is, perhaps, surprising and prompts questions about selection processes more generally. What is clear, though, is that regulatory information cannot reflect the actual selection decision making process, the criteria employed or the rationales for the judgments made. A case can therefore be made for exploring selection rationales in greater detail in order to examine the relationship between degree standards and linguistic proficiency.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The internationalisation of higher education literature is extensive with a bias to the student perspective, in line with much current UK higher education policy. Apart from the specialised series of IELTS Research Reports, relatively little research has explored the academic staff perspective, especially in the areas of academic practice not directly related to teaching and learning or of the pedagogic consequences of classes of mixed nationalities, cultures and English language proficiency.

The literature review is divided into three sections by topic: predictive validity studies of the IELTS test; studies of the use of formal test scores in entry to higher education and finally, a recent study of postgraduate student selection at a UK university.

2.1 Predictive validity studies of IELTS and academic progress

Given the current diversity of scores required for tertiary study, it is legitimate to question the evidence upon which entry score requirements are based. The commonest form of research employed to address this question is the predictive validity study which examines correlations between entry test scores and subsequent academic outcomes of NNES students. An early and influential study of this type (Criper and Davies, 1987) claimed a score of 6.5 best differentiated between academic success and failure. Yet, subsequent studies have not produced such strong correlations between academic outcomes and English entry test scores (Cotton and Conroy, 1998; Hill *et al*, 1999; Kerstjens and Neary, 2000; Lee and Greene, 2007). Interpretation of results is further clouded by methodological issues (Banerjee, 2003) that leave HEIs and their admissions staff poorly supported when selecting a clear cut off point below which students struggle to progress academically. Several authors now consider that linguistic ability is only one influence amongst many in achieving academic progress (Rea-Dickins *et al*, 2007; O'Loughlin, 2008) and that the research model upon which predictive validity studies are based is unable to reflect the reality of the complex, multifactorial, dynamic process of learning. Further support for this view is gained from a recent interview and observation study of NNES fresher students which found that students' language proficiency correlated with their pre-entry test scores suggesting that IELTS scores were reliable (Ingram and Bayliss, 2007).

Significant influences upon academic success include motivation, subject discipline, programme structure, socio-cultural context and adjustment and ongoing language support each of which are complex phenomena in their own right.

The results of outcomes research therefore suggests that greater attention to learning process and context may help to delineate more clearly the relationship between learning proficiency and academic progress, for instance, by exploring whether admissions personnel take into account considerations other than English language test scores when making selection decisions.

2.2   The knowledge of admissions staff about English language tests

Another research track has investigated the attitudes and knowledge of admissions staff, both administrative and academic, towards the test instruments used at their institutions. Studies based in Australia, China and the UK, and at under- and post-graduate levels have consistently found that staff knowledge about the tests and the significance of scores has not always been as sound or extensive as the authors considered it might be (Coleman *et al,* 2003; Rea-Dickins *et al,* 2007; O'Loughlin, 2008). However, in interpreting the results of these studies, it is worth remembering that the authors have considerable expertise in the topic of English language testing. In each case, recommendations have been made that institutions and test providers should strive to encourage greater awareness and knowledge of test structure and scores. Ethical considerations apart, the assumption here appears to be that more fully informed admissions decisions will translate into improved selection processes and outcomes, a proposition that might be, but does not yet appear to have been, tested by an intervention study. Based on the limited knowledge of staff in these studies and the favoured use of questionnaires as methodology, O'Loughlin (2007) suggests that there is scope for more detailed research exploring how staff use their knowledge to interpret and use test scores in selection contexts.

One example regularly cited as a topic of limited knowledge is that of sub-scores and their meanings. Rea-Dickins *et al* (2007) tracked the linguistic progress of postgraduate NNES students in the Departments of Education and Politics at a UK university through interviews and learning logs. These students considered their listening abilities were underestimated by formal tests but, conversely, that the IELTS reading test was insufficiently faithful to the academic context to provide a reliable measure of their reading ability when faced with the heavy load of postgraduate study. The task within the test is important here as the IELTS reading test assesses the candidate's ability to answer questions immediately after reading a passage of text. Academic reading, on the other hand, requires the assimilation of several texts as a preface to the production of written work that incorporates the student's reading and drafted in their own words. This is a far more difficult task than the IELTS reading test and one for which the students in Rea-Dickins' study appeared unprepared. The authors suggest that listening and reading test sub-scores may be better indicators of success than speaking and writing. Whilst further research is necessary to uphold or refute the findings, the research suggests how test sub-scores might be useful in selection decisions.

2.3   Decision making processes of student selection

A singular example of micro-level research on student selection is found in Banerjee's doctoral thesis (2003) in which she investigated, via semi-structured interviews, the selection rationales of two admissions tutors on the MBA and MA in Politics programmes at a UK university. Banerjee found that these admissions tutors did not deal with applicants in the somewhat algorithmic model of selection described at undergraduate level (O'Loughlin, 2008). Their selection decisions represented balanced judgments achieved through consideration of a variety of criteria, which were sometimes competing, and always considered in concert with one another. This is due, in part, to the fact that applicants, especially borderline cases, do not necessarily demonstrate neatly categorised experiences, skills or qualifications; applicants successful on one criterion may be borderline on another. Tutors took into account previous academic experience and attainment, work experience, secondary education, referees and the completed admission form. Occasionally, admissions tutors interviewed

candidates to probe, refute and validate information on the application form. Evaluating the comparative merits of applicants therefore required the operation of judgement on a variety of competences, factors and circumstances including English language proficiency. Only under unusual circumstances or where the demand for places is high is the admissions tutor unlikely to face decisions of the type described by Banerjee. The model of decision making described in this study is compatible with the IELTS recommendation to admissions staff to employ test scores with some flexibility according to the circumstances of each case.

Banerjee then followed eight NNES students who had been selected by the admissions tutors in the study, classifying them according to the degree of 'academic risk'. Employing student interviews and critical incident diaries, she found that the admissions tutors' assessments of risk were sound, those students considered at greatest linguistic risk, reporting more difficulties and time costs in surmounting problems.

Two distinct models of selection emerge from these studies. In one, the language requirement is treated as independent of other selection criteria, a simple accept or refuse decision with little attention paid to borderline cases. In the other, decision making is richly complex, the ultimate choice contingent upon multiple, interacting criteria. The former portrays the tidy world of audit and regulation, apparently free of risk; the latter, the messier reality of everyday life. How these models operate and relate to each other in practice and in different contexts is a matter of speculation, given the lack of research evidence. It is possible that operations of scale may affect the way university selections are made. At undergraduate level, where there are larger numbers of applicants, the process is more likely to resemble the simpler decision making model. At postgraduate level, however, where classes are smaller and the student body more diverse in age, education, nationality and work experience, then the Banerjee model may be more applicable. In summary, these findings require further confirmation through comparative research in different settings. In particular, probing what factors and circumstances selection personnel consider when deciding whether or not to offer a candidate a place.

3   CONTEXT FOR STUDY

The institutional setting for the study is Cranfield University, a wholly postgraduate UK university, classified as a specialist institution by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) because of its strengths in engineering and aerospace. Cranfield's focus on applied knowledge marks it out as unusual amongst its peers. Instead of traditional academic disciplines, the Cranfield campus is organised into four Schools; the Schools of Management (SOM), Applied Sciences (SAS), Engineering (SOE) and Health (CH) and many of the Masters programmes on offer are multidisciplinary in line with the applied focus and strong existing links with industry and management. The rural location of the campus is rare for a UK HEI and renders students largely reliant upon themselves for social and extracurricular activities. In these, and other, respects it provides a contrast to the more typical UK university setting in Banerjee's study.

During the 2007/8 academic session there were 1646 students registered on taught postgraduate Masters programmes on the Cranfield campus. The distribution of students across the four Schools was as follows: Management 33%, Applied Sciences 29%, Engineering 31% and Health 7%. Whilst the numbers of overseas students has increased over recent years, the international character of the Cranfield student body has been established for some time such that in 2008 it was ranked second in the world for its international student community in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings. In 2007/8 there were over 110 nationalities represented on campus.The breakdown in terms of student nationality on the Cranfield campus was 36% UK, 31% non UK EU and 33% from elsewhere in the world. Compared to the HESA figures for the sector, the Cranfield student population has fewer UK students and proportionately more non UK EU students amongst the

overseas group. These descriptive institutional statistics operate at the institutional level and so fail to convey the range of national diversity evident in classes between different Masters programmes.

Around 65 taught Masters programmes were offered in the 2007/8 academic session at Cranfield, although a number of programmes sub-divide into as many as four to six Options. Most programmes are headed by a single named Course Director, with one or two exceptions where directorship is shared and it is unusual for a single person to have responsibility for more than one Masters course. Directorship of Options varies; occasionally it remains the responsibility of the overall Course Director but, more usually, it is awarded to another member of teaching staff whose academic speciality it is. Occasionally but not routinely, Options Directors may also undertake selection duties. In 2007/8, the Schools of Health and Management offered around 10 programmes each with the remainder equally divided between the Schools of Engineering and Applied Sciences. The disciplinary specialisms of Cranfield are associated with a bias towards men amongst staff and students (28% women).

Cranfield Course Directors undertake full responsibilities for student selection akin to Admissions Tutors in larger institutions. They play a crucial role in maintaining academic standards, acting as the link between classroom practice and institutional policy. With their responsibilities for overall assessment, Course Directors are in an almost unique position to make judgements about the relationship between selection decisions and academic outcomes on their programmes. They are also likely to be the final arbiter in borderline cases of selection.

The design of one year taught course Masters programmes at Cranfield is remarkably similar across subjects and Schools. Courses are modular in structure, with module length varying between one and four weeks. Typically, in the first term, teaching takes place largely through the medium of lectures and practicals; in the second, students undertake a group project and in the final term, they embark on an individual research project and thesis. Assessment takes place after each module and examinations are scheduled in January and April. Students have only short leave breaks at Christmas and Easter and the customary summer holiday period is spent on individual research projects. High value is attached to the group project because of the opportunities it affords for work outside academia through team working and/or the relevance of the project to a particular company or industry. This is not merely academic since the Cranfield specialisms of management and aerospace are themselves highly multinational areas of practice. Apart from the MBA cohort which exceeds 100, class size varies between 10 and 80 students and this small class size is reflected in Cranfield being ranked first in the UK and eleventh in the world for the staff student ratio in the THE World University Rankings in 2007.

In a recent research study into the influence of student diversity on teaching and learning at Cranfield, English language emerged as the prime topic for both students and staff (Lloyd-Jones *et al*, 2007). Lecturers reported concern about the standard of students' English language competence, particularly in academic writing. Whilst listening and speaking skills generally improved over the first two to three months, students' writing did not make concomitant progress. There was also concern about the influence of group size and dynamics on teaching and learning. Because of a preference for socialising within the mother tongue group, cohorts where one mother tongue group is in the majority may hinder English language development and cultural integration. Nor are the consequences simply confined to the national group concerned. As non-native English speaking students were keen to improve their English and welcomed constructive feedback about their abilities, there were good reasons from an institutional perspective to investigate English language proficiency in greater depth.

In summary, Cranfield University contrasts with the settings of previous studies, by virtue of being exclusively postgraduate, in boasting a diverse international student body, in a commitment to applied knowledge and in its bias towards science and engineering disciplines. It therefore provides an

opportunity to conduct comparative case study research which may validate and extend our existing knowledge of NNES student selection procedures and rationales (Ward Schofield, 2000).

4   AIMS OF THE STUDY

The overall purpose of the study is to explore current admission practices in relation to English language testing and the consequences of selection decisions upon academic progress and the need for ongoing academic English support at an international, postgraduate UK university.

The study has the following aims:

1. To describe and explain Course Directors' admission practices and experience in relation to IELTS scores.

2. To examine the relationship between non-native English speaking students' pre-admission IELTS scores and their

   - academic progress and

   - ongoing English language support needs

3. To compare the consequences of different admission criteria and practices upon postgraduate students' academic progress in a variety of courses.

5   RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was chosen as most appropriate to the examination of a contemporary phenomenon in context (Yin, 2003) and as a suitable basis for comparison with previous research particularly with Banerjee's study (2003) which had taken a similar research approach. An inductive rather than a deterministic approach towards research design was also preferred such that the research progressed stage by stage allowing the emerging findings to be incorporated into subsequent lines of enquiry and data collection (Maxwell, 2004). This interactive approach served the enquiry well, since early findings from the pilot study were unexpected and had a major impact upon the subsequent research. As a result, the enquiry became a series of inter-related research studies with subsidiary objectives and data collection methods. The report will follow this chronological outline with each successive research study presented in separate sections each with its own methods and findings sections. The intention is to lay bare the problems that emerged during the research and to identify how these were dealt with at the time and the consequences for research process and outcomes.

From the start, the research design was based upon two assumptions. The first was that selection practices might differ between Schools and, possibly, between individual Masters programmes. Not only did this seem plausible given the disciplinary differences but sufficient was known from the earlier diversity study (Lloyd-Jones *et al*, 2007) about institutional structure and School practices to justify the hypothesis and make it an important principle of sampling throughout the study. The second assumption was that all NNES students would enter a Masters programme with a formal English language test score. This did not turn out to be the case (see section 6) and had major implications for the research (see section 9) since it appeared to undermine the second and third aims of the original research proposal. The lack of a baseline measure of English language proficiency across the institution therefore thwarted attempts to compare NNES students' academic and linguistic progress and alternatives had to be sought elsewhere. Because of these difficulties it was decided to focus upon the small group of NNES students who had taken the pre-sessional Summer Programme in English in 2007 before starting Masters study in the autumn. Around half the Summer Programme students entered with a formal test score which could act as a benchmark. Although individual students might demonstrate variable proficiency between different language skills, it could be reasonably assumed

that the level of English language proficiency amongst the group was borderline on entry. Furthermore, as borderline cases, their progress would be of particular interest in terms of the consequences of the rationales that had led to their admission in the first place.

A range of research methods was employed within the case study. The primary focus on the phenomena of selection rationales and decision making which are largely unseen favoured qualitative research methods which were also in keeping with the inductive research design. Qualitative methods were supplemented by documentary analysis in the pilot study and in the review of the Summer Programme students. Finally, the progress of Summer Programme students' progress was evaluated using a series of available measures, a review of their examination scripts and an electronic questionnaire survey of staff supervisors of their Masters theses.

The remainder of the report is divided into three sections, each describing the methods and findings for the three separate research studies which comprise the overall case study. These are:

- a pilot study reviewing selection practices within the institution

- a semi-structured interview study with Course Directors

- a review of Summer Programme students' progress using a range of measures

6   PILOT STUDY

6.1   Data collection methods

The purpose of the pilot study was to establish the institutional regulations and practices surrounding the admission of NNES students on taught Masters programmes at Cranfield. This included details of the pre-sessional Summer Programme English course and the nature and availability of ongoing academic English support on campus. Initially, data was gathered from Cranfield University webpages relating to the admission of NNES students and the Summer Programme but was later supplemented by informal interviews with Registry staff (four) concerned with admission and selection. The roles of these staff varied and included linguists, administrators and academic English teachers directly involved in the selection process and/or the pre-sessional Summer Programme. Notes were taken at the time of the interviews which were not audio-recorded.

Student statistics provided by Registry comprised a third data source with detailed breakdowns of students' nationalities, MSc programmes and English language conditions. Additional, and more detailed, figures were available for students entering through the European Partnership Programme (EPP) in 2007/8 and for students participating in the 2007 English language Summer Programme prior to admission in October 2007. These searches revealed that sub-scores for English language test scores were not stored electronically but existed in paper format which were filed with the students' admission forms. Consequently, a hand search of the admissions files of 177 selected students, equivalent to 10.5% of all taught Masters students was conducted. The records included all students where the offer of a place was conditional upon the evidence of English ability in 10 MSc programmes across four Schools: one from CH, five from SAS and two each from SOM and SOE. The choice of Masters programmes approximately matched the initial sampling rationale for Course Directors in the interview study because interest lay in discovering whether differences in admissions practices between Schools and programmes could be detected from the admissions documents (see section 7.1.1 for details). The admissions files of the remaining 10 Summer Programme students (three of whom were research students) were also included but here the focus was on the individual student and their progress. Therefore no attempts were made to extend the search to all NNES students on the five additional Masters programmes introduced into the study through the inclusion of the additional Summer Programme students.

6.2 Findings

6.2.1 Selection procedures

The pilot study confirmed that Cranfield is in line with many other UK higher educational institutions (HEIs) in requiring the following minimum English test scores from applicants whose first language is not English: IELTS 6.5, TOEFL 580 (paper test) or 237 (computer test) or 92 (Internet test). Other tests, such as TOEIC (830) and the Cambridge ESOL are accepted, in lieu. These levels have been in force for nine years and represent minimum entry requirements which Schools and individual Course Directors may raise, but not lower, if they wish. The date of the test result should not pre-date the start of the course by more than two years. There is some concern about authenticity of paper certificates as fraudulent versions are known to circulate so scores and sub-scores are verified against electronic test databases.

The main finding of the pilot study, however, was the identification of a separate and distinctive entry route for European MSc students through the European Partnership Programme (EPP). This well established scheme, which is linked to the EU Erasmus Programme, permits EU undergraduate students who are currently studying at their home institution to apply to take the final year of study at Cranfield in order to gain a double degree award from both institutions, the final year being an MSc from Cranfield. The route is restricted to continental institutions that have signed a partnership agreement with Cranfield. Currently, the Cranfield website lists 64 institutions in 15 countries but new institutions are being added, particularly from central Europe. The scheme has grown in recent years and the majority of non-UK EU Masters students now enter Cranfield by this route (330 out of 508 in 2007/8). The change has been reflected in the nationalities participating in the English language Summer Programme. Formerly dominated by the developing countries and the Pacific Rim, around 50% of students now come from Europe.

Admission and selection procedures for students entering through the EPP route who are non-native English speakers are distinct from other applicants. After first applying to their host institution and then to Cranfield, applicants are interviewed in their own country by a member of Cranfield staff. In some cases, Course Directors may also interview EPP applicants, although this practice is not universal. Assessment of English language proficiency is then made by the Academic English staff and Course Directors, based upon the interview assessments and written applications. Some students in this group may have sat formal English language tests but by no means all. For example, to gain a Diploma in the French Grandes Écoles system, students must achieve a TOEIC score of 750 (which is lower than the Cranfield entry requirement of 830). The relevance of this finding lies in the large number of French students entering Cranfield each year since there are partnership agreements with 29 French HEIs. There are advantages to the EPP procedure. Over time, Course Directors become increasingly familiar with the undergraduate courses from which students apply and so are able to assess their academic abilities in some detail from their transcripts. Another advantage is an immediate opinion on a borderline student's need for pre-sessional academic English tuition. In this case the student will be offered a place, conditional on the successful completion of the on-campus, pre-sessional Summer Programme. In 2007/8, of 29 students on the Summer Programme, 14 were EPP taught Masters students.

The circumstances of students whose first language is not English and who cannot participate in the EPP necessitate different arrangements for the assessment of English language proficiency. European students who are attending institutions outside the EPP are required to produce a satisfactory test score in line with the regulations. For students beyond Europe, however, there are numerous grey areas such as applicants with prior experience of English at work or in education for whom a formal test might be redundant. Where there are doubts, the Course Director is encouraged to interview these applicants by telephone, if necessary, to assess the applicant's language skills and, depending upon the outcome, either request a test or waive the requirement.

6.2.2   Academic English provision

In recent years the increasing number of overseas students at Cranfield has raised awareness of the need for academic English support. Students who have not gained a 6.5 score may be admitted provided they attend an intensive pre-sessional English programme (Summer Programme) before the start of the year in October. The Summer Programme runs from July to September and aims to improve students' ability and confidence in the four language skills in the context of academic study at Cranfield. Broadly speaking, an IELTS score of 6 requires a minimum of one month's tuition, a 5.5 score requires two months and a student with a score of 5 must take the full three month course. Using a similar rule of thumb, students may improve by 0.5 of a band score for each month's tuition but this is very variable. The programme has the following capacity which varies with the students' ability: up to 6 students may attend the full three months, 12 for two months and a maximum of 30 for the final month. Class teaching takes place each morning followed by a variety of individual and group activities in the afternoon. A range of writing tasks is set regularly. Assessment is largely formative and students meet with a tutor on a weekly basis to set goals and discuss progress. At the end of the course, a report is sent to their Course Director commenting upon the student's achievement and their ongoing need for English support. Each language skill is graded (range A to E) and accompanied by comments. The grade E indicates a student's language skills are inadequate for successful study at Masters level. Around 10% of Summer Programme students do not reach the required standard to enter a Masters programme.

The reports may also advise a student to continue with weekly English tuition for academic writing that is provided by the academic English staff. In 2008 the sessions were opened to other NNES students who responded with such enthusiasm that a screening test had to be used to assess eligibility. Occasional students may have one to one tuition where resources allow. Other support is provided at School level; the School of Management offers oral English classes but places are neither free nor unlimited. Nevertheless, students from other Schools are welcome to join these classes if considered appropriate by their Course Director.

6.2.3   Analysis of selected application forms

Some of the complexity and subtleties involved in the admissions and selections process is apparent in the 177 hand searched records from students where evidence of English language proficiency was made a condition of entry. Were the model of algorithmic selection to prevail, then almost all students would be expected to present test scores and other forms of evidence would not be prominent (see Table 2). This is not the case as only two thirds (118) of the sampled students possessed a test score and 50 of these students were interviewed. It is not possible to identify from the records whether the test or the interview takes precedence in terms of either time or significance. In just over a third of applicants (68) the test score is the sole cited evidence of English language proficiency.

The Registry records suggest that the interview plays a frequent role in the assessment of English language which is sometimes conducted by telephone. 61 students were interviewed and the English test score requirement was waived for 11 of them. Again, the records are not always informative on the reasons for the waiver but experience of degree level education or working in England or in English are cited. In view of the diverse population found in postgraduate education (Sastry, 2004), these waivers do not necessarily imply that institutional policy is being flouted, as there are many reasons why applicants for postgraduate study may have good English language skills which can render a formal English test irrelevant. Because the reasons for waiver are not always supplied, it is likely that the number of recorded interviews in the figures is inaccurate, probably an underestimation. The records do, however, validate the Registry staff data by demonstrating that interviews are conducted by a Cranfield representative or, specifically, by Course Directors and, sometimes, together. They share the load almost equally between them but this is likely to vary with the number of EPP students in the sample. A larger number of non-EU students will favour the Course Directors.

Category	Student numbers
Total number of students	177
Cranfield Health	4
School of Applied Sciences	73
School of Engineering	53
School of Management	47
All students with an English test score	118
Students with an English test score alone	68
All students interviewed and with an English test score	50
All students interviewed	61
Students interviewed but without an English test score	11
Interview with linguist	33
Interview with Course Director	29
Interview with Course Director and linguist	1
Total number of recorded English test scores	141
Students with more than one English test score	20
Students with IELTS	50
Students with TOEFL	41
Students with TOEIC	17
Students with other tests – Cambridge ESOL etc	19
Students with GMAT	13
Students with overall IELTS scores of 6/6.5 with a sub-score of 5.5 or below	9

Table 2: Methods used to assess students' English language proficiency for admission to Cranfield of a purposive sample of 177 students in 2007/8 (taken from Cranfield Registry data)

Distinctions were apparent in selection processes between Schools and programmes. Students (n=18) applying for places in SOM were more likely to present more than one test score whether these were repeated tests of the same or different types. Amongst these is the General Management Aptitude Test (GMAT) which is not a test of English language ability per se, but assesses analytical writing, verbal ability and numerical reasoning and is widely used in academic business and management disciplines. All the students with GMAT were applying for places in SOM courses. There were also variations between Masters programmes in the extent to which interviews were cited by Course Directors as a method of gathering evidence. This was independent of interviews with other members of Cranfield staff. One Course Director in SOE interviewed almost half of the listed NNES students (9 out of 20) whereas one course each in CH and SOM did not mention Course Director interviews and three others in SOE and SAS interviewed less than 10% of NNES students within the cohort (see Table 3).

School	Sampling code	Total number of students	Number of NNES students	Number of students interviewed by CD
CH	CH	14	4	0
SAS	SAS1	49	20	1
SAS	SAS2	30	12	1
SAS	SAS3	32	24	4
SAS	SAS6	4	4	1
SAS	SAS7	19	11	2
SOE	SOE1	36	26	1
SOE	SOE2	42	20	9
SOM	SOM1	42	34	7
SOM	SOM2	30	13	0

**Table 3: Numbers of recorded interviews conducted by Course Directors in the selection of
NNES students in 10 Masters programmes (taken from Registry data)**

Although the IELTS test is the most frequently used test of English proficiency amongst the sample
(50) it is only slightly more popular than the TOEFL test (41). The search showed that an acceptable
overall score could mask discrepancies in sub-scores. Of 24 students with overall scores of 6 or 6.5,
nine students had at least one sub-score of 5.5 or less and six of these were in writing (see Table 4). In
an unusual example, a student with an overall score of 6.5 had a sub-score in Writing of 4 and two
other students with overall scores of 6 had 2 sub-scores below 6 in Writing and Speaking.

In summary, the findings from the pilot study confirmed initial assumptions that selection practices
and procedures differed between Schools and Masters programmes. In relation to the first aim of the
study, the findings pointed to differences between individual Course Directors, and hence Masters
programmes, in their preference for the use of a selection interview. The findings were specifically
incorporated into the next stage of the enquiry by including the topic in the interview schedule for
Course Directors, as was the topic of sub-scores. Consequently, and as intended, the pilot study shaped
the subsequent enquiry.

However, the diverse measures employed to assess English language proficiency for entry to the
institution held implications for the second aim of the study. At the start of the research, it was
assumed that the great majority of, if not all, NNES students would enter with an English test score but
the pilot study showed this was not the case. The lack of a general baseline measure of NNES
students' English language proficiency at entry meant comparisons on a scale initially envisaged for
the research would be logically insecure. In addition, the small numbers of students with English test
scores for whom a comparison might be attempted would probably render any statistical technique
invalid. For that reason, we sought alternative means of fulfilling the second aim.

School	Overall IELTS score	Listening score	Reading score	Writing score	Speaking score
CRH	6.5	7	5	6	7
SAS	6	6	5.5	6	6
SAS	6.5	5.5	9	4	7
SAS	6.5	5.5	7	7	7
SAS	6	7	6.5	5.5	5.5
SAS	6.5	7	7.5	5	7
SOE	6	5.5	6.5	5	6
SOM	6	6	6.5	5	6
SOM	6	6	6	5	5

Table 4: IELTS scores for NNES students scoring 6 or above overall but below 6 on one sub-score (taken from Registry data)

At the same time it is important not to infer too much from the findings of what was functionally a pilot study. Firstly, sampling was purposive so precluding any generalisation to the institution at large. Secondly, it is safe to assume that the admissions data is incomplete, not in a regulatory sense but because the records do exactly that, they record. There is no requirement to explain or justify decisions, or to elaborate upon what takes place in an interview, however it may be conducted. To investigate this further would require a more detailed exploration of Course Directors' practices and experiences of selection which follows in the next section**.**

7   INTERVIEW STUDY WITH COURSE DIRECTORS

7.1   Method

The interview research study addresses the first aim in the proposal: to describe and explain Course Directors' admission practices and experience in relation to students' IELTS scores.

As much decision making appears to be implicit, one to one semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection best suited to reveal, elaborate and discuss this aspect of the Course Director's role. Nevertheless, in choosing the interview method, the limitations of the data were recognised as a source of inference for reported action when compared to observed behaviour (Hammersley, 2006). What respondents report may not parallel their actions for a variety of reasons but interviews were preferred as a method suitable for discussion and elaboration of their decisions and underlying rationales in the light of the Registry data and the research literature. In contrast to other studies, (Coleman *et al*, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2008), the interview study neither set out to investigate policy compliance nor to test academic staff's knowledge of English language testing.

7.1.1   Sampling

The sampling rationale and selection of Course Directors for inclusion in the interview study were decided by the research team, two of whom (CN and SM) had several years' experience of the institution. Sampling also took into account the views of admissions staff taking part in the pilot study into admission practices. The findings of the preliminary study favoured a purposive sampling approach designed to reveal the variety of viewpoints that reflected range and scope in preference to the construction of a typical perspective. Based upon contextual knowledge, experience of the setting

and the wider socio-economic context of UK higher education, the research team identified the following criteria that might influence a Course Director's viewpoint on NNES student selection:

- schools/disciplines

- demand for places on the programme

- class size

- courses with large groups sharing a first language other than English

The interpretation of the demand for places requires further elaboration. The institution is currently paying attention to the admission and selection process, in particular, to the numbers of applicants, the number of places offered and accepted. Whilst such information may be held at departmental or School level, it was not publicly available at the time of the study. Therefore, the judgement of the demand for places on individual courses was based upon the experience and knowledge of the institution of the relevant members of the research team (CN and SM). In an attempt to corroborate the sampling decisions, questions were included in the interview about student applicants, offers and conversion rates, although these data were variably forthcoming.

One Course Director was included in the sample because of an interest in English language testing although the Masters programme he directed also fitted the sampling criteria. As the study progressed, a further category emerged in terms of the length of experience of directorship, when it became apparent that one Course Director was in his first year in the role. The realisation prompted an additional train of enquiry about how staff involved in making selection decisions learn to do so and whether there might be a need for academic development and training in the area. The prevalent use of selection interviews, which are generally conducted in one to one situations, provided another justification for the inclusion of the category. For this particular MSc programme, two interviews were included, one with the existing Course Director and another with his predecessor.

Table 5 lists the participating Course Directors, their Schools, the variation within the criteria and the interviewee codes. All Course Directors were male save for the Course Director in Cranfield Health. Eight of the programmes in the pilot study were represented in the interview study.

Of 16 Course Directors approached to participate, one declined on the grounds that he was about to relinquish the role. He suggested that the incoming staff might contribute instead. As this programme had been designated a low demand course, it was important to pursue alternatives to avoid omitting a potentially significant perspective. Two solutions were found to the problem. In the first, a departmental staff member with four years experience of admission and selection for one of the programme options consented to an interview. In the second, it was decided to follow up the Course admission and selection responsibilities. A group interview was preferred due to the shared situation facing the group members (Morgan, 1997) and the limitations of experience in the role upon data gathering in a one-to-one situation. As well as exploring departmental staff attitudes, the focus group aligned with the emergent criterion of role expertise already discussed above and brought into the study the views of academic staff who were themselves multilingual, non-native English speakers (German and Egyptian). Some of the focus group members had experience of teaching in other UK HEIs and abroad and so were able to offer comparative viewpoints. Another MSc programme was omitted (although it had been used in the pilot study) when it was realised that the Director was on maternity leave and her role was temporarily being undertaken by a colleague.

Interviewee Code	School	Demand	Monolingual groups	Class size	Course Directorship experience
CH	Cranfield Health	unspecified	None	14	4 years
SAS1A	School of Applied Sciences	high	14 French	49	In first year of post
SAS1B					6 years
SAS2	School of Applied Sciences	high	None	30	10 years +
SAS3	School of Applied Sciences	low	None	32	4 years
SAS4	School of Applied Sciences	low	None	10-15	6 years
SAS5	School of Applied Sciences	medium	None	10	3 years
SOE1	School of Engineering	high	None	36	10 years +
SOE2	School of Engineering	low	10 Polish	42	10 years +
SOE3	School of Engineering	high	19 French	52	4 years
SOE4	School of Engineering	high	None	50	10 years +
SOM1	School of Management	high	None	42	3 years
SOM2	School of Management	high	None	30	1 year
SOM3	School of Management	high	None	55	5 years

Table 5: Sampling for Course Directors' Interview study

The selected interviewees were approached by email and/or telephone and given a brief summary of the research, an explanation for their selection and an invitation to participate in an interview about admission and selection practices of NNES students. They were informed that the interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed but that his or her identity would be protected in future presentations and publications. For the purpose of reporting, School titles have been retained but, for reasons of confidentiality, the MSc programme titles have been coded in order to protect the confidentiality of participants.

7.1.2   Interview schedules

The interview schedule (Appendix 1) was drafted to explore Course Directors' practices of admission and selection in relation to English language proficiency and, particularly, the ways in which they employ English language test scores in selection decisions. The schedule was divided into three sections which covered the following topics:

- factual information about the MSc programme and the interviewee's experience of Course Directorship

- selection and admission practices of non-native English speaking students on the programme

- the relationship between international classes, pedagogy and academic progress of NNES students

The reason for pursuing the third topic was to illuminate Course Directors' views on the NNES academic and linguistic progress and to explore the practical means at a teacher's disposal to

encourage learning in the international postgraduate classroom. An example of the latter is the extensive use of group projects in Cranfield MSc programmes where problems arising in classes with multilingual students may become evident. How teachers manage, moderate and overcome the problems arising might help to illuminate some issues in the literature about cultural difference and second language acquisition.

At the time of the study, the institution was engaging in a controversial debate about the publication of all Masters theses on the web and its topicality led to the inclusion of a question inviting participants' views. Finally, the choice of semi-structured interview method favoured an open and discursive approach towards questioning that allowed the interviewer to pursue and probe novel and emergent ideas, examples and concepts as they arose.

Course Director SOE1 (in Table 5) was chosen as the pilot interviewee for the interview schedule because of his openly expressed and considered views on the topic. It was anticipated, correctly, that his engagement would lead to a productive interview and provide a good test of the listed questions. Existing questions were satisfactory but additional questions were added about the programme's history, status within the UK HEI sector and the programme structure and assessment format, especially in relation to group project work. The latter was a fertile topic for discussing language and cultural issues.

The focus group guide (Appendix 2) was modelled on the interview schedule but with fewer questions and prompts to accommodate more open discussion and the emergence of relevant topics of interest to the participants. The single use of focus group method did not allow piloting of the focus group guide but, as the guide was a modified extension of the interview schedule which had been employed several times already, this was not seen as a major handicap. In practice, discussion and interaction in the focus group flowed well.

The duration of interviews and the focus group varied from 45-60 minutes and all were conducted by GL-J. Apart from two interviews and the focus group, they took place in her office between March and December 2008. The interviews with SAS2 and SOM3 took place, at their request, in their own offices and SAS2 declined to be audio-recorded. Notes were taken throughout this interview but all the remaining interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription by GL-J.

The data was analysed using MAXQDA software using deductive and inductive approaches. The former followed the line of questioning in the schedules; more inductive approaches led to the emergence of novel and unexpected themes within the data.

8 FINDINGS

This section is divided into three parts based on themes that link the research literature to the data. The first describes the different models of selection practices at Cranfield and the influence of the sampling criteria upon them as appears in the data. The second concerns Course Directors' knowledge and use of English test scores in the selection process and how these relate to other considerations in selection decisions. The final section deals with Course Directors' views of NNES students' academic and linguistic progress and how these relate to programme structure, delivery and pedagogy. Subsidiary topics and concerns recur across sections and are cross referenced as appropriate.

8.1 Models of selection practices

Three models of selection practice, related to School affiliation, emerge from the data. Although there are examples of Course Directors exerting autonomy in selection practices, the majority conform to the model prevailing within their School. As there was only a single contributor from CH, these data are not included in this section.

The most distinctive of the Schools in developing a collective approach to the admission of NNES students is found in SOM for it has developed guidelines which extend the institutional regulations. As well as the IELTS score of 6.5, SOM demands a minimum sub-score on the writing component of IELTS of 6 and reserves the right to request an overall score of 550 and a writing analysis score of 4.0 on GMAT. The requirements apply regardless of whether the programme content favours text or number. SOM differs from the other Schools in admitting fewer EPP students (3 out of 127 in the programmes sampled) who are subject to the same requirements as other students so the linguists' involvement in selection is less than elsewhere. The findings in the pilot study provide supporting evidence for the operation of the School's language requirements. Nevertheless, six students with IELTS scores of 6 or less were admitted to Masters programmes, conditional on satisfactory completion of the Summer Programme. Where a Course Director wishes to offer a place to an applicant who scores below the required test score it is customary for him to seek the approval of the sub-Dean for academic performance or equivalent.

The requirements express the SOM's belief that it is preferable to filter out less linguistically able students at entry in preference to devoting extra resources to the support of borderline students. In justification, Course Directors stress the intensive and demanding character of Masters study and question whether spare time exists to devote to additional language study, a point that will be revisited in Section 8.2. Extract 1 is typical of the SOM viewpoint:

Extract 1

> "I think we have to screen them *(borderline cases)* out if we think they are not going to be up to scratch in terms of language capability instead of admitting people with doubtful capabilities and trying to provide catch-up. It's a distraction of time and resources. We shouldn't be doing that. We are not here to teach them English. They should have reached a certain competence in English. If they're marginal, we can provide some help but I don't think it should be institutionalised at all because that's not what this programme is about."
>
> <div align="right">SOM3 Course Director</div>

Course Directors are encouraged to interview applicants but there are resource implications so it is a matter of personal choice to what extent they do so. One SOM Course Director had chosen to interview as a matter of routine and was convinced that the standard of entrants had risen as a result.

Extract 2

> "When I'm talking about interviewing it's for the majority of overseas candidates. So this is partly about providing verification of information that has been provided, it's partly about assessing their suitability or their experience, their motivation and so forth but it's also an opportunity to get an idea about English language ability as well …………… I have found that with overseas students you do need to delve into some of the detail because sometimes the information on the application form is not always 100% complete or accurate so it's worth having a discussion about some of the details. We use interviews selectively but we are using them increasingly because we're getting higher quality candidates overall."
>
> <div align="right">SOM1 Course Director</div>

Selection practices in SOE share some features with SOM, principally in adherence to institutional requirements for test scores. However, there are no guidelines for selection at School level and three of the four Course Directors did not interview students routinely. There are larger numbers of EPP students admitted in the School, 56 out of around 175 students on the sampled programmes in this part of the research. SOE Course Directors display more autonomy in managing the selection process since two of the four interviewed described distinctive and contrasting practices which merit further description.

As already mentioned, SOE1 was particularly concerned with NNES selection because of students' poor writing ability, an opinion that was shared by other teachers on his programme. Consequently, two years ago he had raised the entry requirement for the programme from IELTS 6.5 to 7 but he remained unconvinced of any gains in improvements in writing. The admissions records show that 18 NNES applicants presented appropriate English test scores and two borderline students with IELTS scores of 6.5 were admitted conditional on completion of the Summer Programme. SOE2, on the other hand, interviewed the majority of the NNES applicants for his course; the admission records show he interviewed nine of 19 NNES students for entry in 2007/8, the highest proportion of interviews of any programme in the pilot study. Six of the remaining students presented English test scores and others were interviewed by Cranfield staff. One of the latter students was advised to take the Summer Programme. The Course Director regarded the interview as an opportunity, first and foremost, to gauge the technical ability and, after that, the linguistic proficiency of the applicant, as displayed in Extract 3.

Extract 3

> "I ask them about their technical background and through that they have to use a fair bit of English describing what they've done what their aspirations are, what they want to do after they've Cranfield. Why they want to come to Cranfield? Things like that. We use it as a technical interview just to check that they are ok with the material and that they are happy with content of the course. That's the thing I'm most concerned with. I mean, most of these students are taught English at their own university. They're pretty good. They don't really have any problems with the taught material. So spoken English is fine. The only, the areas where, that sometimes causes problems is probably the thesis project and writing an extensive report."
>
> <div align="right">SOE2 Course Director</div>

The diversity evident in the selection processes amongst SOE Course Directors differs from the collective approach found in SOM and suggests that authority for selection is more likely to rest at Course Director than at School level.

The selection practices in SAS differ again from the other two Schools. The proportion of EPP students in the School is the highest amongst the sampled programmes, 66 out of around 125 students, and selection procedures reflect this. Whilst some Course Directors interview students, they leave the responsibility for assessing linguistic ability to their colleagues. There is a close working relationship between the SAS directors and linguist staff which extends beyond selection to ongoing language

support for students on SAS programmes. How this works in practice is described in the following extract.

Extract 4

> "It's useful to differentiate between the EPP students and the non-EPP students The EPP students have all come to us with a recommendation from *the linguist staff* and I've relied on them to provide the English language judgement because they've met the individuals. For non-EPP students, we look for the IELTS and go quite strongly on IELTS or equivalent tests. A small minority we will interview by telephone and usually if I do that, I will get someone like *the linguist staff* to help me. I will be concentrating on the more technical aspects and they will be looking at the English language."

<div align="right">SAS1B Course Director</div>

The association predates recent campus relocation before which some SAS programmes and the academic English staff occupied a separate campus several miles away from the main campus. SAS Course Directors who have always been located on the main campus did not evince such close working relationships with linguist staff.

8.1.1   Demand for places

The hypothesis that demand for places might influence selection practices is directly related to the contemporary UK debate about degree standards and internationalisation. No evidence was found for the lowering of entry requirements in response to lessening demand for a specific course. However, there was support in courses where demand was high, as Directors were able to consider raising language entry requirements and consciously reflected upon using English language entry requirements as a filter to determine the allocation of places. This could take two concrete forms. It could, as in the case of SOE1, which has few competitors in its field elsewhere in the UK, simply raise the English test score required for entry. Alternatively, a Course Director might face fewer difficult decisions on candidates whose English entry proficiency was borderline. In Extract 5 a Course Director in SOE describes how demand and English language entry requirements are related on his course.

Extract 5

> Course Director: "We were able to more or less guarantee that because with more than 400 applicants we could just pick the ones. You can really cherry pick."
> Interviewer: "Could you raise the entry level requirement?"
> Course Director:"I don't know that, I haven't thought about it but I don't know whether we would need to."

<div align="right">SOE4 Course Director</div>

Similar examples occurred in SOM and SOE but only in courses designated as high demand.

8.1.2   Large student groups with a shared language other than English

Course Directors considered that social and cultural integration of NNES students were important factors for academic and linguistic progress. Almost all Directors cited the challenge that a large minority group of monolingual students could present because of the attendant risk of delayed integration. The tendency to form social cliques diminishes opportunities to improve English language and discourages enculturation.

Extract 6

> "About a third of our students are French and most of our European partner universities have a limit of four or five maximum on the MSc and, within an option, they're not happy if there's more than two because experience occasionally has shown that they form a clique, just speak in their native language and their English really does not improve at all."

<div align="right">SAS1A Course Director</div>

The resulting deleterious effects on learning and academic progress can affect the experiences of native English speakers as well as NNES students and are particularly evident in group projects. All save one Course Director paid considerable attention to the balanced allocation of students to groups for group work with regard to nationality and English language proficiency as well as academic ability. The courses selected to highlight this issue, SAS1 and SOE3, demonstrated how careful matching of selection decisions to course design and delivery can help to diminish any barriers arising from the presence of large minority groups of this nature within a cohort. In the SOE3 programme, for instance, every student gives a weekly oral presentation about their individual work to the group for the first six months of the course. In SAS1, the sharing of group projects between students on different Options permits contact with a wider and varying group of students. The same considerations extended to the selection of students on the smaller Options and some programmes with small classes.

8.1.3   Class size

There was no evidence that class size affected selection decisions independent of demand or due to the presence of a majority NNES student group with a shared language other than English.

8.2   Course Directors' use of English test scores in the selection process

8.2.1   General selection criteria

In selecting suitable students, Course Directors are primarily concerned with the assessment of academic ability and potential to undertake study at Masters level (see Extracts 2 and 3). Directors repeatedly emphasised the difference between undergraduate and postgraduate study, referring to the 'intensity' of Masters study such that study time was jealously protected as described in Extract 7:

Extract 7

> "It's a case of the cost of time and how we can schedule it into what is already a nine to five programme, five days a week. There are lots of things that people say well can you introduce this or that on the course and I say we can do but something else has got to give. We can't keep on adding more things in. If we add something in we have to take something out."
>
> SOE3 Course Director

Course Directors were looking for motivated, confident students capable of expressing themselves well and conveying arguments within their field (see Extract 3). These are important capabilities given the importance attached to group projects and the UK higher educational values of independence and critical thinking. English language proficiency is fundamental to the development and demonstration of these abilities and interviews were conducted with these principles in mind. One experienced SAS Course Director who favoured interviewing considered it important to evaluate the applicant's ability to adapt to the UK HE system (Extract 8). His views were unique in this respect.

Extract 8

> "You look at, obviously there's the academic ability of the student which you can get from their course results and then you have to make a decision on whether you think this person is capable of coming into a completely new system. It's partly language, partly confidence, partly motivation. So I don't think I would reject someone on language alone, if you see what I mean."
>
> SAS2 Course Director

Where students presented an English test score, Course Directors followed the institutional and School regulations and many regarded this as a simple matter of rule following (see Section 8.3). Although most were aware that English tests incorporated separate assessments of different language skills there was little detailed knowledge of variations between tests. Only Directors in SOM and two in SAS (SAS1B and SAS3) looked at sub-scores on a regular basis though others were more likely to do so in borderline cases.

8.2.2   Borderline cases

Course Directors treated borderline cases and applicants without test scores rather differently, examining application forms for validation of claims and for discrepancies between qualifications and displayed skills (see Extract 2). A perfectly scripted personal statement, for instance, might invite suspicions that it was not the applicant's own work. Evaluations were often subtle and based on prior experience of previous cases such as students from a particular institution or country. The preference for interviewing was a personal one although all who favoured the method claimed it was a highly useful verification of an applicant's speaking skills (see Extracts 2, 3 and 11). The assessment of writing skills is a more difficult challenge because of concerns about authenticity which it is almost impossible to guarantee. Most Course Directors were aware of the issue and some took steps to examine an applicant's spontaneous writing skills through emails and instant messaging.

Extract 9

> "I might get an email saying I'm interested in the course, can you tell me a bit more about it? The one thing that does worry me when I get emails from some students is when it's all in text speak and that always worries me. You look at it and say hmm, ok. Is your English language so great? Why are you using text speak because you should be emailing me in proper sentences? Ok, when you speak to the student a bit more, you start to get the proper sentences coming through."
>
> CH Course Director

Two Course Directors, one each in SOE and SAS, had invited applicants to write a piece on a topic related to the course at interview.

8.2.3   Sceptics

Amongst the sampled group were two Directors, in SOE and SOM, who had considered selection in some depth and had come to view English tests with a degree of scepticism. Whilst not majority views, their experience and subsequent reflections justify further exploration.

The Course Director in SOE had more than 10 years of experience in the role and during this period had relied almost exclusively upon test scores to assess an applicant's English language ability, without recourse to interviews. Two years previously, worried by the poor writing standards of his students, he had raised the entrance requirement for the course to 7 but the desired consequences had not been realised. He now doubted his previous reliance upon English testing (Extract 10) and was searching for alternative, additional means of assessment such as another test, a writing task or an interview.

Extract 10

> "Because, even now, having upped the barrier, even now we are getting students in the past couple of years who are still struggling on the course and I'm getting to the point of thinking, do you just keep on putting the barrier up? Or do we realise that maybe the measures, or the test, perhaps, is not testing in the way that mirrors what they are expected to be able to do when they come to Cranfield."
>
> SOE1 Course Director

The SOM Director had three years experience in the role but had set himself the task of developing the admissions and selection process during his tenure. He also followed the institutional and School guidelines on entry test scores but had seen many cases where the entry score had not correlated with either linguistic ability or academic progress. As a result, he had introduced interviews for most applicants and believed that the standard of candidates had improved as a result. He evoked a pragmatic view on testing, as displayed in Extract 11.

Extract 11

> "These tests are not completely reliable. You may have two people with IELTS 6.5 and one is outstanding …... but one of the concerns I have about examinations in general is that a test like this is

how someone performs in certain circumstances on a specific day according to certain conditions and if they took the same test a month later under different circumstances they may well get a different result. We know that from people doing examinations. So I think it is not a completely reliable test so I like to have a bit of a second test by doing interviews. An interview is not a test of English language ability but it does give you some quite good indicators about their ability to communicate which is quite important."

<div align="right">SOM1 Course Director</div>

Nearly all Course Directors had similar cautionary tales of students with test scores that did not correlate well with subsequent linguistic and academic progress, including a student who failed an MSc despite having gained an undergraduate degree in the UK. These tales, which are grounded in experience, give primacy to experience rather than to the statistical evidence underlying formal testing.

8.2.4   Management of the selection process and learning how to select

Whilst some Course Directors were firmly of the belief that interviews gave good guidance for selection decisions, there were those with contrary views who were content to rely on the test score as the sole measure. Sometimes these attitudes viewed selection decisions as a matter of administration, informed by issues of efficiency and resource use, such as the view below in Extract 12 gained from experience at another UK university.

Extract 12

"We had a set up in the department where there were a number of admissions tutors that were recruiting for each of the separate degrees and we were all spending quite a lot of time doing that task and we realised that a lot of the task wasn't academic. It was mainly administrative. The place where I came from we eventually appointed an administrator and her role was to carry out all the admissions tasks in the department except from where it was borderline. So she would say, no, these are clearly reject, you're going to see it factually, there are set criteria and all these are clearly accept and then there was a middle mound where she used to pick up the pile and go around the corridor and then go to talk to the academics and say what do you think from an academic point of view? And I would have said that probably most of my task so far on admissions, I'm only making an academic decision about 20% of the time."

<div align="right">Focus group participant</div>

Although this participant is describing events outside the institution under study, it is congruent with other Course Directors' views, albeit a minority. The attitudes contrast with the view in the research literature that greater knowledge about the tests amongst those concerned with admissions and selection will lead to sounder selection decisions. It suggests that there may be resistance on the part of some academics towards further training in this area. In connection with this, no consensus emerged from the interviewees about the necessity for any additional training in selection.

The privacy within which selection decisions are made calls into question how Course Directors learn about admissions and selection. When new to the role, almost all had been mentored by their predecessor and had learnt through a combination of experience and advice from colleagues (Extract 13).

Extract 13

"Some of it you just gain from chatting to your colleagues. What do you think of this person when you first start getting applications through and then you just start to do it on a feeling from experience. Well I've had someone through with a similar application before so we'll give them a go sort of thing."

<div align="right">CH Course Director</div>

Mentoring works well when the previous Course Director remains in the institution but if he or she leaves then the incoming Director may be remarkably unsupported. Unsurprisingly, the one Course

Director whose predecessor left the institution felt there was a place for formal training for new Course Directors.

8.3   Course Directors' views of NNES students academic and linguistic process

This section contributes to the second aim of the study by presenting the opinions of Course Directors about the linguistic and academic progress of their NNES students; particularly those with English test scores. As no attempts were made to refer to specific students currently studying at Cranfield in the interviews, the views expressed are couched in general terms but with some individual examples taken from experience.

8.3.1   Relationship between test scores and academic progress

As well as the two Course Directors quoted in section 8.2.3, opinions about the extent to which English proficiency test scores could be relied upon to indicate that an individual student was capable of successful study, uncompromised by linguistic problems, were contentious. Whilst some Course Directors appeared satisfied with institutional requirements and current selection procedures, others were unconvinced. The many stories of dissonance between the English test scores and subsequent academic progress chime with the inconclusive results of the research literature seeking associations between English language proficiency and academic outcomes and reflects Course Directors' beliefs that academic success depends on a complex array of factors and circumstances.

Several Course Directors stressed the importance of immersion into the UK educational culture as an essential prerequisite for linguistic and academic advancement. The diversity of Cranfield's student body is a help here because English is the common language in an international student body. Despite this, some Masters programmes may have significant numbers of students who share a first language other than English. Directors expressed concern about NNES students who live with other compatriots whilst in the UK, since it can compromise the degree to which NNES students use and practise English and hence limit the potential for linguistic development. However, it is considered inappropriate to intervene in a student's extracurricular affairs and so it remains a difficult area over which neither the institution nor Course Directors can exert any control. Immersion in the English language will appear later in connection with the Summer Programme students (Section 9.2.3)

8.3.2   Speaking skills

Exploring Course Directors' views of the development of NNES students' language skills demonstrated that the main issue lies with writing skills. Although skills in speaking may be initially limited, the majority of students overcome these difficulties within the first two to three months such that they are able to converse satisfactorily for course purposes. Only rarely were there stories of students whose pronunciation was so poor that they were unable to complete the course. In Extract 14, a NNES lecturer comments on students' spoken English.

Extract 14

> "Spoken English generally, in the beginning perhaps, may be a little more difficult but students adapt very quickly and therefore I think spoken English is not the biggest problem actually. I never saw any big problems with spoken English."
>
> <div align="right">NNES Lecturer, SAS, focus group</div>

Speaking as a student in class, however, is overlaid with cultural references and this can sometimes cause problems for a lecturer trying to assess an individual student's linguistic progress. In Extract 15, a Course Director muses on the interaction between culture and language for Chinese students on his course.

Extract 15

> Interviewer: "How long does it take before the Chinese students' spoken English is reasonably good?"

> Course Director: "Well, they can be very quiet but equally you can get some people who stand out, who are prepared to put themselves forward. I think it's more of a cultural thing but maybe it's not, maybe it's that they're not comfortable in English. If they were more comfortable in their English, they'd stand out more. I'm not sure which one it is."
>
> Interviewer: "Do they make any further progress or remain like that throughout the course?"
>
> Course Director: "No, I think they come round. I think they come round in the second semester. That's why I think it's not their English, it's more a cultural aspect but that could be argued to be not the case. You could argue that three months here improves their English. I'm not sure at this point."

<div align="right">SOM2 Course Director</div>

In general, though there was agreement that oral skills are not a major problem which may be a consequence of the Cranfield context, not least its geographical isolation which renders students more reliant upon themselves, the campus and the local environs for extracurricular activities.

8.3.3   Writing skills

One topic on which there was broad agreement amongst Course Directors was concern about standards of written English (Extracts 3 and 16).

Extract 16

> "Out of 40 students, there's probably a handful or so where it could be a problem if it's not managed by the supervisor towards the time when they are writing up the report. If ever that slips then occasionally we do get a poor quality written report. So it's a matter of identifying the students that are weak. Normally, it ties in with, it's strange but, it ties in with their academic performance. So by the time they start the thesis we know which ones are borderline and not particularly strong and it's those that we really have to focus on to make sure that they are supervised fairly closely in terms of what they put in the report, the structure and what they write. It's a relatively small numbers but yes, it's there."

<div align="right">SOE2 Course Director</div>

The thesis was a recurring problem primarily because, as a publicly available document, it is a manifestation of academic standards that is open to external scrutiny. Furthermore, the debate about whether to publish all Masters theses on the web had the effect of focusing Course Directors' concerns about standards. Another feature of poor thesis writing was the impact upon supervisors and their workloads. Thesis supervision is a relatively unseen aspect of academic work because the process is largely undocumented and the incentives to produce a quality document are strong. Consequently, there is little evidence to demonstrate differential workloads related to students' writing skills. Additionally, the timing of the thesis allows little scope for substantive improvements in writing proficiency.

Whilst there was consensus about student writing, there was little agreement about the remedies; particularly as academic staff may not regard it is part of their remit to correct English language (See Extract 1). Nevertheless, several Course Directors reported pedagogic strategies designed to deal with students most at risk. Firstly, early writing assignments, sometimes formative, had been introduced to identify students in greatest need of ongoing English tuition. Secondly, many courses maximised opportunities for students to practise writing. In one example, the structure of a group project report was deliberately modelled on the thesis to facilitate learning. Thirdly, a long standing Course Director remarked that much more learning support was now provided for thesis writing than had ever been offered previously.

A number of confounding issues emerged in discussions about writing skills. The first, and unanticipated, finding was that poor writing was not confined to NNES students alone; UK students were reported as less able than formerly to produce good written work. A second point related to the assessment of English language in written scripts. Each school has its own policy on assessment but in general, marks are not allocated specifically for language per se although it may be subsumed under

criteria such as 'presentation' or 'structure' for which marks are allocated in marking schemes. It was therefore not surprising that Course Directors varied in the degree to which they corrected grammatical and spelling errors on course assignments and theses. SAS5 and SOM2 proof read their students' work, making corrections, because they believed it to be good feedback practice and hoped it might encourage students to improve their written English. Extract 17 exemplifies these points.

Extract 17

> "I will mark course work, and I think my colleagues do much the same thing; they will highlight where there are English problems within a report and encourage students, in future reports, to try and improve their English. The only time where it would have a bearing on the mark is if it becomes unreadable and we are not able to understand what they are trying to convey in which case it will cause a lowering of the mark. But we don't have an element of the mark that is for English. We will, on occasion, have elements of the mark for presentation, but that isn't necessarily looking at the language that is used. It's more to do with the structuring of the report or the presentation of the map work that forms an important part of some assignments."
>
> <div align="right">SAS5 Course Director</div>

Many Course Directors proposed that there should be more willing and capable 'proof readers' on campus to reduce the burden on supervisors. These suggestions came from Course Directors in all Schools but SOE Course Directors were particularly likely to voice the suggestion. It is worth noting that the nature of 'proof reading' was not explored in any depth during the interviews. Whether the implications are to attend to surface features of grammar or to deeper problems of editing how ideas and arguments are expressed cannot therefore be determined. The data indicate that the thesis is the academic product most likely to reflect the tension between academic standards and the rise in NNES students but that solutions are neither easy nor immediate.

9 SUMMER PROGRAMME STUDENTS' PROGRESS

This section describes how the second aim of the study, seeking a relationship between NNES students entry test scores and subsequent academic progress, was attained. In Section 5 we explained how the research enquiry was diverted to a study of the Summer Programme students in consequence of the limited number of students entering with English test scores. Recognised as an alternative strategy, a study of Summer Programme students would be justified since they represented a discrete group of students whose language abilities had been identified as borderline and whose progress might be tracked.

In considering the concept of progress as applied to Summer Programme students, it was decided to construct profiles for each student that might log the development of their English language proficiency during the year. Initial intentions were to compare these with profiles of academic progress including marks from assignments and projects through the year but this was not possible because it contravened institutional regulations concerning the publication of individual students' marks, so alternatives had to be found.

9.1 Data collection methods

9.1.1 Documentary sources

For this part of the study data sources included documents and questionnaires. The 2007 Summer Programme students underwent a number of linguistic assessments in the first few months at university which were accessible through the academic English staff. These included scores for students who had taken English tests and, following completion of the Summer Programme, reports for each student including grades for separate language skills, comments and recommendations for future study. In addition, all Summer Programme students participated in a pre-test IELTS exercise in the penultimate week of the Summer Programme towards the end of September 2007 which covered

academic writing, listening and reading skills but not speaking. A pre-test is primarily designed to test new items for inclusion in future IELTS papers so marks are not strictly comparative with a true IELTS test. In fact, listening and reading papers are marked as raw scores, not band scores, although the maximum score for the combined papers is provided. Despite distinctions, advice to candidates states that the pre-test IELTS results will give an indication of ability so the results supplied an approximate measure for those students without entry scores and for whom no baseline comparison measure existed. It is possible too, that relative differences, or similarities, between individual student's pre-testing scores are robust, albeit on a single examination sitting.

9.1.2   Examination scripts

Apart from a student's need for ongoing language tuition there were no specific measures of student's language abilities once the student had commenced the MSc course. The earlier diversity study (Lloyd-Jones 2007) and the Course Directors' interviews had established that written skills were those giving rise to concern and, on this basis, a decision was made to focus upon students' writing abilities. Course assessments were preferred as data sources because of their contextually appropriate nature. The alternative of additional testing was considered but rejected on the grounds that it would be unacceptable to the students concerned. Of the three written assessment formats, course assignments, examinations and theses, the latter two were chosen for investigation. Assignments were rejected because of questions of authenticity and feasibility. Organising, and retrieving the large number of scripts necessary was deemed beyond the scope of the present study and sampling on a lesser scale appeared daunting. On the other hand, exam scripts were clearly authentic and the practice of two sittings before Christmas and Easter provided standardisation in time across the different courses.

Access to examination scripts was approved by Registry provided the students and Course Directors consented. Course Directors of Summer Programme students were emailed for their consent and all were willing. Summer Programme students were contacted individually by email with requests for consent to access their examination scripts. The email included an explanation for the request and a brief rationale for the study. Two students, both in SOE, declined, leaving 22 students participating in the exam script study. Course Directors or Course Administrators provided the exam scripts which were copied and the originals returned to their departments. The scripts of three students and one paper each for two more students were unavailable as a result of external examining requirements. By agreement, the copies will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

The scripts were examined with two questions in mind. The first was to gain an impression of the amount of textual content in the scripts which might corroborate the interview data for certain programmes (see Extract 3). The second was to identify examiner's comments about language, either critical or positive. Two reviewers separately read the scripts, a lecturer from the Academic English staff and a member of the research team. There was good agreement between the two reviewers; the only shared doubts concerned how to interpret a few comments about style or structure.

9.1.3   Questionnaire for thesis supervisors

As access and evaluation to more than 20 theses from varied domains would clearly be impossible within the time scale and prevailing circumstances, a different approach was adopted towards the quality of students' thesis writing. The effect on supervisory workload identified in the interview study indicated that Summer Programme students' thesis supervisors could shed light on students' writing proficiency. A brief electronic questionnaire was constructed inviting the appropriate supervisor to comment upon whether the English language proficiency of his or her supervisee had affected the thesis mark and/or the supervisory workload (Appendix 3). Where respondents stated that the student's proficiency had had an adverse effect, they were asked to provide more details. An open question allowed respondents to make any further comments they felt to be relevant. The questionnaire was piloted within the CPLT with a previous Course Director and minor revisions made to the wording.

The names of supervisors of the Summer Programme students were obtained from the relevant Course Directors. The questionnaire was delivered electronically early in November 2008 after final thesis submission. Due to an oversight, the supervisors of the two Summer Programme students who declined to participate in the exam script study were not included so questionnaires were sent to 22 supervisors. The accompanying email named the Summer Programme student concerned and explained that the questionnaire referred to this particular supervision. Therefore each supervisor received an individual invitation although the questionnaire was identical. Non-responders received reminders one and two weeks later.

9.1.4   Academic progress

The time of completion of the study, January 2009, coincided with the period during which students receive notification about the outcomes of their degree awards. The research team was granted access to these records for the Summer Programme students. Significantly for the present study and the focus on thesis writing, the records provided details about the outcomes of thesis marking. Cranfield University does not award distinctions for Masters programmes, so there is no differentiation in grading amongst those students who have passed. However, there are three possible categories of outcome. A straight pass, a pass subject to minor corrections and a revise and represent instruction where the student is required to make major changes to the thesis within a given time frame, around three months. Minor corrections are not a major impediment to the gaining of a degree but the necessity to revise and represent leaves a question mark over the outcome until the revised thesis is marked a second time. With the questionnaire data, the records provide further information about Summer Programme students' progress with tasks that most challenge their language skills.

9.2   Findings

9.2.1   Summer Programme students – language assessment at entry

29 students took the Summer Programme in 2007, 26 of whom were destined for taught course Masters programmes. One withdrew prior to the start of the Masters and another student transferred to a research programme early on in the year which left 24 students who completed both Summer Programme and Masters programmes and who contributed to the present research. Numbers were small and considered inappropriate for statistical analysis.

Summer Programme student	School	Language assessment	Entry test score	Test sub-scores
SAS1	SAS	Interview		
SAS2	SAS	Interview		
SAS3	SAS	Interview		
SAS4	SAS	Interview		
SAS5	SAS	Interview		
SAS6	SAS	Interview		
SAS7	SAS	Interview		
SAS8	SAS	Interview		
SAS9	SAS	Interview		
SAS10	SAS	Interview		
SAS11	SAS	Interview		
SOE1	SOE	English test	TOEFL CBT 220	L 20 St.W22 R 24 E 4.
SOE2	SOE	Interview		
SOE3	SOE	English test	TOEFL CBT 243	L 25 St .W 22 R 26 E 4
SOE4	SOE	English test	IELTS 6.5	L 7 R6.5 W 6 S 6
SOE5	SOE	Unknown		
SOE6	SOE	English test	TOEFL IBT 92	R 27 L 26 S 18 W 21
SOE7	SOE	English test	IELTS 6	L 5.5 R 6.5 W 5 S 6
SOM1	SOM	English test	IELTS 6	L 6: R 6 W 5 : S 5
SOM2	SOM	English test	IELTS 6 TOEFL IBT 64	IELTS N/A TOEFL R 16: L 18 S 15: W15
SOM3	SOM	English test	IELTS 5.5	L 6 : R 5 W 6: S 5
SOM4*	SOM	English test	IELTS 6	L 6 : R 6.5 W 6 : S 6
SOM5	SOM	English test + Interview	IELTS 6	L 6 : R 6.5 W 5 :S 6
SOM6	SOM	English test	IELTS 5.5	L 5: R 6.5 W 5 : S 5

* SOM4 IELTS score 3 months earlier 5.5
Bold type   low sub scores
IBT Internet based test   CBT Computer based test
L Listening   St W Structured Writing   R Reading E Essay
S Speaking   W Writing

Table 6: Summer Programme students' language assessments at entry

Table 6 shows the list of the 24 Summer Programme students who took part in the research, the
method of language assessment, the entry test score and sub-scores, where available. The data confirm

the earlier findings from the pilot and interview studies showing differences between Schools in admission practices for borderline NNES students. SAS students are solely assessed by interview, SOM by English test score and SOE use both methods of language assessment but are more likely to use formal English tests. Problems arose locating the records for Student SOE5 who transferred to another MSc programme within the same School.

Students SOE3, SOE4 and SOE6 comply with the university requirement for English entry requirements but SOE3 and SOE6 have not reached the standard for their MSc programme. SOE4 presented two IELTS scores almost a year apart; the initial score was 6, the later one, 6.5.

The score of student SOE1 lies between IELTS 6 and 6.5 but the remaining scores are below the minimum entry requirement. All of the latter group, save one student, have at least one sub-score of 5.5 or lower, which is somewhere between the modest and competent user in the IELTS band score descriptors. Student SOM4 presented the results of two IELTS tests, three months apart which showed an improvement of one band score in the later result which is reported in the table.

The majority of Summer Programme students attended the Summer Programme for four weeks but four students, SAS2, SAS10, SOM2 and SOM 6 attended for eight weeks.

9.2.2   Summer Programme students – pre-test IELTS

All Summer Programme students sat the pre-test IELTS in September a week before the conclusion of the Summer Programme and just before the start of the Masters course. For reasons already explained, the pre-test exam differs from IELTS so direct comparisons of the results with IELTS scores are not entirely reliable. There are other differences, notably in marking. Writing is the only skill given a band score similar to IELTS. Listening and Reading are reported as raw scores; the total marks available for Listening are 49 and for Reading, 45. The pre-test IELTS results are shown in Table 7 with the students' IELTS entry scores, where available.

The overall results for the Summer Programme students are low when compared to pre-entry test scores and to the university entry requirements. Band scores for Writing average between 5 and 5.5. Only one student of the group with overall pre-entry IELTS scores of 6 or higher (or equivalent) scores 6 on Writing, the remainder range from 5.5 to 4. At the extremes, two students in SAS (SAS1 and SAS4) and one in SOE (SOE6) score 6 and at the other end of the range, two students in SAS (SAS2 and SAS11) and one in SOM (SOM3) score 4 or 4.5. The raw scores for Listening and Reading show approximately similar patterns of score distribution. The average score for the group on Listening is 27 (55%) and in Reading 26 (58%). The three students scoring 6 on Writing also score highest on Listening and Reading, when the two scores are combined. Of the three lowest scoring students on Writing, two also score low on Listening and Reading (36 and 38) but not the third (47). Three students with Writing scores of 5.5 have scores below 40 for combined Listening and Reading. Although the circumstances of the pre-test urge caution in interpreting the scores, the findings indicate that these students' English language skills are borderline.

Summer Programme student	Language assessment	Entry test score	Pre-test IELTS scores (09.07)			
			Writing	Listening	Reading	Total
SAS1	Interview		6	33	42	75
SAS2	Interview		4	14	22	36
SAS3	Interview		5.5	8	24	32
SAS4	Interview		6	37	35	72
SAS5	Interview		5	19	22	41
SAS6	Interview		5.5	26	24	50
SAS7	Interview		5	14	15	29
SAS8	Interview		5.5	34	34	68
SAS9	Interview		5	21	19	40
SAS10	Interview		5	24	29	53
SAS11	Interview		4.5	20	18	38
SOE1	English test	TOEFL CBT 220	5.5	32	32	64
SOE2	Interview		5.5	29	25	54
SOE3	English test	TOEFL CBT 243	5.5	36	32	68
SOE4	English test	IELTS 6.5	5	34	23	57
SOE5	Unknown		5.5	25	35	60
SOE6	English test	TOEFL IBT 92	6	37	37	74
SOE7	English test	IELTS 6	5.5	24	23	47
SOM1	English test	IELTS 6	5.5	34	33	67
SOM2	English test	IELTS 6 TOEFL IBT 64	5	36	27	63
SOM3	English test	IELTS 5.5	4	29	18	47
SOM4	English test	IELTS 6	5.5	21	18	39
SOM5	English test	IELTS 6	5.5	27	25	52
SOM6	English test +Interview	IELTS 5.5	5.5	24	21	45

Table 7: Summer Programme students' pre-test IELTS and entry score

9.2.3   Summer Programme students – Reports

On completion of the Summer Programme, academic English staff compile individual reports on
Summer Programme students. Students are graded on an alphabetic system from A, A-, B+, B, C+, C
on four course components: academic reading, academic speaking, academic writing and listening
comprehension and note taking. The report includes specific feedback on the student's progress for
each component, the student's attendance, advice for the direction of future work and the need for
formal ongoing support in English language. Reports are sent to the relevant Course Director for
guidance and information. Table 8 shows the students' grades from the Summer Programme reports in
comparison with entry scores, pre-test IELTS scores and overall entry test scores, where available. It
also includes specific recommendations which were given to students to attend weekly tutorials on

academic writing. All students are advised to be aware of the dangers of spending too much time with other students sharing the same language.

Summer Programme Student	Entry Test Score	Pre-test IELTS scores				Summer Programme reports				
		W	L	R	Total	W	LN	R	S	Rec.
SAS1		6	33	42	75	A	A-	A-	B+	No
SAS2		4	14	22	36	C	C+	C+	B-	Yes
SAS3		5.5	8	24	32	B-	C+	B-	C+	Yes
SAS4		6	37	35	72	A-	B+	B+	B+	No
SAS5		5	19	22	41	C+	C	C	C	Yes
SAS6		5.5	26	24	50	B-	C	B-	C	No
SAS7		5	14	15	29	B-	C	B-	C	Yes
SAS8		5.5	34	34	68	B+	B+	B	B+	No
SAS9		5	21	19	40	B	B	B+	A-	No
SAS10		5	24	29	53	A-	B+	A-	B	No
SAS11		4.5	20	18	38	C	B-/C+	B-	B	Yes
SOE1	TOEFL 220	5.5	32	32	64	B+	B+	A-	A-	No
SOE2		5.5	29	25	54	B	B-	B	C	No
SOE3	TOEFL 243	5.5	36	32	68	B+/A-	A-	A-/B+	B+	No
SOE4	IELTS 6.5	5	34	23	57	B-	B	B	B	No
SOE5		5.5	25	35	60	B-	B	B	B-	No
SOE6	TOEFL 92	6	37	37	74	B	B+	A-	B+	No
SOE7	IELTS 6	5.5	24	23	47	B+	C	B	B+	No
SOM1	IELTS 6	5.5	34	33	67	B	B	B+	B	No
SOM2	IELTS 6	5	36	27	63	B+	A-	A-	B+	No
SOM3	IELTS 5.5	4	29	18	47	C-/C	C	C	C-	Yes
SOM4	IELTS 6	5.5	21	18	39	A-	B+	A-	B	No
SOM5	IELTS 6	5.5	27	25	52	B	B+	B+	B/B+	No
SOM6	IELTS 5.5	5.5	24	21	45	B	B	B	B	No

*   Ongoing support required
Rec.   Recommendation for continuing language support
W Writing   L Listening   R Reading   LN Listening and note taking   S Speaking

Table 8: Summer Programme students' entry and pre-test IELTS scores and Report grades

Generally, there is correspondence between the pre-test IELTS scores and the Summer Programme reports. However, the pre-test IELTS report scores for Students SOM4, SAS 9 and SAS10 are less favourable than the report grades, particularly so for SOM4. All students who score low either on the

Writing score or on the combined Listening and Reading score were recommended to attend the weekly tutorials in English language. Student SAS2 was referred to the Disability Learning Support Officer for investigation because of writing difficulties. Students SAS4 and SAS7 who were entering courses where there were many students with whom they shared a first language were additionally advised to maximise opportunities for English language practice.

9.2.4   Exam scripts of Summer Programme students

The review of exam scripts demonstrated that nearly all examinations required students to write extended passages of text apart from one course in SOE where textual content was low. However, this was far from the case with the other SOE exam scripts where passages of text were common. Counter-intuitively, scripts from a quantitatively orientated course in SOM contained much less text than the SOE scripts.

Comments about the examinee's written language were not uncommon. The examination scripts of three students, SOM1, SOM2 and SAS3 all contained critical comments which specified language, such as 'generally superficial and with inaccurate use of English'; 'this comment is worrying but could just reflect a language barrier'; 'weak language' and 'not an answer, needs explanation, suspect language problems?; appalling style, clearly has problems with written English but basics are here' (*sic)*. The comments on the scripts of two other students (SOM6 and SAS9) referred to 'poor style', 'dumping not answering' and requests for more detail and explanations besides bulleted lists. Two students answered too many questions and one student received praise for presentation (SOM5). Statements that might be language related were found on other students' scripts but have not been reported because they cannot be securely attributed to language difficulties alone. Written comments were most frequently found on the scripts of SOM students.

It was not anticipated that exam scripts would provide a rich source of evidence of language difficulties because there is no requirement for examiners to mark English language specifically. It is possible too that examiners may take a more relaxed approach to the quality of English language in stressful exam conditions. The interview data had shown variation in the degree to which Course Directors paid attention to English language in course assignments so similar variation amongst examination markers was also to be expected. As described above, comments were strictly evaluated to exclude any ambiguous remarks. Consequently, those comments presented in the report are likely to underestimate the contribution of language issues in exam scripts and so can be regarded as robust evidence for the purposes of the research. The results are included in Table 9.

9.2.5   Summer Programme students – Workload of thesis supervisors

15 out of 22 supervisors responded to the questionnaire, a 68% response rate. Supervisors' experience of supervising Masters theses ranged from two to 20 years and five had been supervising for 15 years or more. The number of Masters theses each supervisor was responsible for in the academic session varied from one to 16 but this range obscured the fact that 13 were supervising between four and seven theses.

The question relating to the students' English language proficiency to the thesis mark was answered by only half the respondents and, in retrospect, lacked clarity. 20% of all supervisors considered the student's language proficiency had beneficially contributed to the thesis mark and 33.3% not at all. Whilst none completed the 'adversely' box, seven supervisors supplied open comments which were critical either of non-native English speakers writing skills in general (2) or of their supervisee in particular (5).

Summer Programme student	Entry test score	Exam script	Effect upon supervisor workload	Thesis outcome
SAS1		Unavailable	None	Revise and represent
SAS2		None Partial access	Adverse	PGDiploma subject to conditions
SAS3		Critical of language	Adverse	Revise and represent
SAS4		None Partial access	Adverse	Revise and represent
SAS5		None Partial access	Adverse	Pass
SAS6		Unavailable	Unknown	Revise and represent
SAS7		None	None	Pass
SAS8		None	Unknown	Revise and represent
SAS9		Critical of style	Adverse	Revise and represent
SAS10		None	Adverse	Pass
SAS11		None	Adverse	Pass
SOE1	TOEFL CBT 220	Unavailable	Unknown	Pass
SOE2		None	Unknown	Pass
SOE3	TOEFL CBT 243	None	None	Revise and represent
SOE4	IELTS 6.5	Unavailable	Unknown	Minor corrections
SOE5		None	Adverse	Pass
SOE6	TOEFL IBT 92	None	Adverse	Revise and represent
SOE7	IELTS 6	Unavailable	Unknown	Revise and represent
SOM1	IELTS 6	Critical of language	Unknown	Revise and represent
SOM2	IELTS 6 TOEFL IBT 64	Critical of language	Equivocal	Revise and represent
SOM3	IELTS 5.5	None	Unknown	Revise and represent
SOM4	IELTS 6	Critical of language	Adverse	Revise and represent
SOM5	IELTS 6	Positive on style	Adverse	Minor corrections
SOM6	IELTS 5.5	Critical of style	Unknown	Revise and represent

Table 9: Summer Programme students' entry scores compared with, exam script comments, supervisor's reported workloads and thesis outcomes

80% of supervisors stated that their students' English language proficiency had adversely affected their supervisory workload; the remaining 20% claimed it had had no effect. However, the supervisor of SOM2 reported that although his workload had been unaffected there had been a necessity to read several drafts and to focus on language rather than content. Twelve respondents wrote descriptive comments about the supervisory experience, detailing how their work had been affected. Most referred

to the extra time involved in reading multiple drafts and the additional feedback that was necessary with each successive draft. The comments emphasised that it is not simply a matter of reading multiple drafts but a necessary qualitative change in the task of reading which involves interpreting poor English. As expressed in the words of one supervisor: "Several iterations of the same sections were sometimes necessary to establish clarity of thought and expression". Two supervisors mentioned specific difficulties with data and their presentation. One supervisor had spent considerable time on early drafts and advised his supervisee to use a proof reader for help in preparing the final version. The replies to this question are shown for the students concerned in Table 9.

Answers (12) to the final open question inviting additional relevant comments have been listed in Appendix 4. Whilst many reinforced the comments above by referring specifically to the individual supervisory relationship, others raised wider issues about the effects of internationalisation upon higher education, the role of the supervisor and the compromises that are sometimes necessary to produce a thesis that satisfies disciplinary and language standards and requirements. These findings establish that the English language proficiency of half of the Summer Programme students impacted negatively upon the workload of their supervisors.

9.2.6   Summer Programme students – thesis outcomes

Table 9 shows the outcomes of the relevant Examination Boards for the Summer Programme students in terms of the degree award and the status of the presented thesis as at January 2009. Including theses requiring minor corrections, seven of the Summer Programme students have been awarded their Masters qualification and 14 students are required to revise and represent their theses for further assessment before receiving their Masters degree. One student, SAS2 was awarded a PGDiploma instead of a Masters degree, subject to passing a further examination. These figures confirm the findings in the pilot study that Summer Programme students are more at risk of failing academically.

Tables 10, 11 and 12 collate the results of the various studies employed to assess the progress of the Summer Programme students for individual Schools.

Four out of seven Summer Programme SOE students have gained their degrees without having to revise and resubmit their theses but this does not rule out the possibility that they were experiencing language problems as the example of SOE5 demonstrates (Table 10). The thesis of this student was passed but the supervisor reported an increased workload due to the student's language problems.

There are no responses from the supervisors of the other three students so language problems cannot be ruled out despite the successful academic outcomes. Of the students who are required to edit their theses for further submission, one is reported as having no English language problems so language deficiencies are not responsible for the student's lack of success. However, the supervisory comments for SOE5 indicate that English language proficiency was contributing to the academic outcome for this student. Overall, the group has a high revise and represent rate (43%), two students with identified language problems, one student without and question marks over the remainder despite their academic success.

S P St	E T S	PI W	PI L	PI R	PI T	S P Rep W	S P Rep LN	S P Rep R	S P Rep S	Exam scr	S W	Thesis
SOE1	TOEFL CBT 220	5.5	32	32	64	B+	B+	A-	A-			Pass
SOE2		5.5	29	25	54	B	B-	B	C	None		Pass
SOE3	TOEFL CBT 243	5.5	36	32	68	B+/A-	A-	A-/B+	B+	None	None	Revise and represent
SOE4	IELTS 6.5	5	34	23	57	B-	B	B	B			Minor corrections
SOE5		5.5	25	35	60	B-	B	B	B-	None	Adverse	Pass
SOE6	TOEFL IBT 92	6	37	37	74	B	B+	A-	B+	None	Adverse	Revise and represent
SOE7	IELTS 6	5.5	24	23	47	B+	C	B	B+			Revise and represent

SP St   Summer Programme student
E T S   Entry test score
PI   Pre-test IELTS   W Writing   L Listening   R Reading   T Total
SP Rep   Summer Programme Reports   LN Listening and note taking   S Speaking
Exam Scr Exam Scripts   None no comments about language
S W   Supervisory workload

Table 10: SOE Summer Programme students' entry scores and measures of progress

The SOM results have the highest proportion of revise and represent students of all the Schools (83%); only one student of six has been awarded a degree without going through major thesis revision. Three students, including the one who passed outright, are reported as having language difficulties during thesis supervision and critical comments about language or style were found in four students' exam scripts. The results suggest that five students have experienced difficulties with written language. The supervisor of the fifth student, SOM3 has not responded to the questionnaire so no conclusions can be reached for this student, despite the low scores and report grades.

S sP St	E T S	PI W	PI L	PI R	PI T	S P Rep W	S P Rep LN	S P Rep R	S P Rep S	Exam scr	S W	Thesis
SOM1	IELTS 6	5.5	34	33	67	B	B	B+	B	Critical of language		Revise and represent
SOM2	IELTS 6 TOEFL IBT 64	5	36	27	63	B+	A-	A-	B+	Critical of language	Equivocal	Revise and represent
SOM3	IELTS 5.5	4	29	18	47	C-/C	C	C	C-	None		Revise and represent
SOM4	IELTS 6	5.5	21	18	39	A-	B+	A-	B	Critical of language	Adversely	Revise and represent
SOM5	IELTS 6	5.5	27	25	52	B	B+	B+	B/B+	Positive on style	Adversely	Minor corrections
SOM6	IELTS 5.5	5.5	24	21	45	B	B	B	B	Critical of style		Revise and represent

SP St   Summer Programme student
E T S   Entry test score
PI   Pre-test IELTS   W Writing   L Listening   R Reading   T Total
SP Rep   Summer Programme Reports   LN Listening and note taking   S Speaking
Exam scr   Exam Scripts   None no comments about language
S W   Supervisory workload

Table 11: SOM Summer Programme students' entry scores and measures of progress

Student SAS2 was awarded a PG Diploma, not a Masters degree, and on condition the student retook one exam. Six of the remaining students (54%) are required to revise and represent and of whom four have other evidence of language problems from their supervisors. However, the supervisor of SAS1 has reported that there are no language difficulties which is congruent with the student's pre-test IELTS scores and Summer Programme report grades which suggests that academic reasons underlie the need for major thesis revision. Perhaps of more concern are the three students (SAS5, 10 and 11) who have passed the thesis but who are reported as having writing problems. This leaves seven students where language problems have been identified as contributing adversely to academic outcomes, two whose writing abilities are reported as satisfactory and two students who are revising their theses but whose supervisors have not responded to the questionnaire.

S P St	E T S	PI W	PI L	PI R	PI T	S P Rep W	S P Rep LN	S P Rep R	S P Rep S	Exam scr	S W	Thesis
SAS1		6	33	42	75	A	A-	A-	B+		None	Revise and represent
SAS2		4	14	22	36	C	C+	C+	B-		Adversely	PGDiploma
SAS3		5.5	8	24	32	B-	C+	B-	C+	Critical of language	Adversely	Revise and represent
SAS4		6	37	35	72	A-	B+	B+	B+		Adversely	Revise and represent
SAS5		5	19	22	41	C+	C	C	C		Adversely	Pass
SAS6		5.5	26	24	50	B-	C	B-	C			Revise and represent
SAS7		5	14	15	29	B-	C	B-	C	None	None	Pass
SAS8		5.5	34	34	68	B+	B+	B	B+	None		Revise and represent
SAS9		5	21	19	40	B	B	B+	A-	Critical of style	Adversely	Revise and represent
SAS10		5	24	29	53	A-	B+	A-	B	None	Adversely	Pass
SAS11		4.5	20	18	38	C	B-/C+	B-	B	None	Adversely	Pass

SP St   Summer Programme student
E T S   Entry test score
PI   Pre-test IELTS   W Writing   L Listening   R Reading   T Total
SP Rep   Summer Programme Reports   LN Listening and note taking   S Speaking
Exam scr Exam Scripts   None no comments about language
S W   Supervisory workload

Table 12: SAS Summer Programme students' entry scores and measures of progress

Overall, the results display some of the difficulties facing researchers who try to ring fence the contribution of English language skills to academic progress. Whilst the supervisors' perspective has provided helpful triangulation, the partial nature of the data and the difficulty in correlating different assessment measures hinder the aim of reaching secure conclusions about the contribution of linguistic competence to academic ability and outcomes for individual students. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to conclude that these Summer Programme students, as a group, remain borderline in terms of English language proficiency throughout the year of study.

10 DISCUSSION

The discussion is framed by the three aims of the research study with references to the literature included where relevant.

10.1 Course Directors' admissions practices and experiences

The most striking finding of the study was the variety of selection practices within the institution. The variations were linked to School affiliation and, possibly, to former organisational arrangements when there were two campuses rather than one. The selection procedures varied in relation to the use of English test scores, ranging from SOM at one end which placed greatest reliance upon English testing to SAS, at the other, which largely delegated assessment of an applicant's English language proficiency to linguist staff, often conducted by interview. The latter form of assessment operates within the EPP scheme which links HEIs around Europe prepared to exchange students under the EU Erasmus programme. The third School, SOE shared features of SOM and SAS selection procedures employing formal English testing and, where appropriate, assessment by linguist staff of EPP students. Although differences stemmed from School affiliation, there was evidence of autonomy of selection practice at the organisational level of Course Director, particularly in SOE where the greatest diversity of practices amongst Masters programmes was found. The strong collective culture in SOM is displayed in School regulations for the admission and selection of NNES student which supplement the institutional regulations. SOM Course Directors may modify selection procedures but only by employing additional measures that extend but do not replace the existing School and institutional requirements, for instance, through a preference for interviewing applicants. The consequences of these differences in practices between Schools and, to a lesser extent, programmes will be revisited under the discussion of the third aim of the research.

There was substantial evidence of complex decision making in selection rationales of the type described by Banerjee (1995) which are built upon multiple and sometimes competing, criteria. This was regardless of School affiliation or programme. Several extracts, especially those relating to applicant interviews, demonstrate how Course Directors view the integration of language and academic abilities. Interviews permit an interrogation of an applicant's disciplinary knowledge through the medium of English language, so allowing both to be evaluated. Correspondingly, there was little support for the alternative version of selection portrayed in the literature in which evidence of English language ability operates independently of other considerations. SOM, for instance, which is the School which places most reliance upon English entry test scores, yet prefers to use a variety of tests rather than rely upon a single one.

There may be several explanations for these findings. To some extent they may reflect the portrayal of different perspectives; academics being more likely to favour complexity of judgement, administrators, transparency and the requirements of quality assurance and earlier studies have incorporate both viewpoints in the same study. Secondly postgraduate applicants are not only diverse in nationality and language, but in age, educational background, academic qualifications and career experience. It is these aspects of an applicant's history, and others, that a Course Director considers in deciding whether to make the applicant an offer of a place, yet they are not publicly recorded. In consequence of this diversity, it is common for applicants to satisfy one criterion but to be borderline on another; applicants do not display sets of skills and experience which fit neatly into selection criteria. This fact is neither sufficiently acknowledged in the literature nor in the spheres of policy, and audit. Postgraduate applicants differ substantially from the typical applicants for UK undergraduate courses who are often of comparable age and educational qualifications and where, as a result, selection procedures and practices may differ. These differences plus questions of scale imply differences between undergraduate and postgraduate selection.

A third reason relates to the demand for course places. Where demand for places is high, applicants are more likely to comply with entry requirements so reducing the need to consider borderline applicants who possess more varied profiles of ability and experience that entail more complex judgements. The data supported the influence of demand for places as Course Directors of programmes that were in high demand were more likely to consider raising the levels of English entry test scores and to be able to ensure that all their students complied with entry requirements. Selection decisions under these circumstances may be simpler where language requirements are concerned although choices amongst other criteria may be more challenging.

No clear consensus emerged amongst Course Directors about the predictive relationship between entry test scores and subsequent academic progress. A minority of Course Directors were outspokenly sceptical of inferring too much from a single test score and the majority could quote narratives of students where there was little correlation between English entry test scores and academic outcomes. This was true whether test scores were high or low. In describing selection rationales, Course Directors frequently referred to their own experience and sometimes of their colleagues, for instance, of students from a particular country or institution and this implicit knowledge appeared to play a considerable part in selection decisions. Selection decisions represented balanced judgments encompassing a variety of criteria which were considered in the round rather than singly or in isolation. In summary, the reported behaviour of Course Directors was congruent with that of Admissions Tutors in Banerjee's study (1995) and with the inconclusive results of studies of the relationship between English tests and academic outcomes.

Course Director's knowledge of English tests and structure varied amongst the interviewees but only one expressed interest in learning more about the available tests of English language proficiency. A minority of respondents were resistant to further development activities of this type, perceiving them as unnecessary. All Course Directors knew the institutional and School requirements for NNES applicants. Course Directors in SAS possessed less detailed knowledge of tests but such knowledge was redundant because linguist staff were responsible for making decisions on English language competence. These findings echo the findings in studies by Coleman *et al* (2003), Rea-Dickins *et al* (2007) and O'Loughlin (2008) but in the current study Course Directors regarded their knowledge as sufficient to the task in hand. It therefore contests the assumption, in the context of the present study, that greater awareness and knowledge of English will improve selection decisions and judgements. The findings in relation to Course Director's knowledge of English tests were congruent with the balanced judgement model of decision making and also reflected their view that a single test result contributed to, but did not solely determine, whether an offer should be made to an individual applicant.

The generally poor view of NNES students' writing abilities was evidence that test scores, even when in line with entry requirements, were no guarantee that a student could write satisfactorily in an academic genre, particularly for extended texts such as the thesis. Because of this issue, the assessment of writing skills was a matter of concern but one for which nobody had a clear solution. Whilst a selection interview provides useful information about oral skills, it does not contribute to assessments of writing skills. Student SAS2 from the Summer Programme whose English language was assessed by interview and was later suspected of having a learning disability exemplifies the attendant risks of some current practices. However, the assessment of writing skills is easier said than done when it is remembered that application forms, submitted papers or prepared texts are subject to questions of authenticity. The attempts of some Course Directors to engage students in electronic interaction or spontaneous writing exemplify their unease about assessments of writing. Writing assessment was another instance where Course Directors would resort to implicit knowledge and experience about an applicant's former educational background and HEI as evidence in selection decisions.

There was also ample evidence that Course Directors had responded to the present situation through the consideration and introduction of many modifications to their courses in order to ensure early

identification of students most at risk and to facilitate students' writing skills early on in the programme. The outcomes of these initiatives were mixed. The introduction of a portfolio with an initial literature review was reported as having improved students' writing skills. On other courses, there had been less success. There was only one course where the opportunities for writing text, prior to the thesis, were limited and which might be contributory to the occasional poorly written thesis.

The overall concern about writing skills raises another question which is whether entry requirements should be higher for postgraduate courses in general, however it is assessed. Certainly, the majority view of these Course Directors is that the intensity of Masters study is such that there is little, if any, capacity for students to devote time and effort to anything other than academic activities. The results following the progress of Summer Programme students would support this view. Whilst some UK HEIs require higher English test scores for postgraduate than for undergraduate study this is not necessarily standard practice. The experience of Course Director SOE1 who had raised the entry requirement for his course is, however, not encouraging in this regard.

More positively, there was a reassuring consensus that students' oral skills were adequate for Masters study. To what extent this finding is particular to the context is a matter of speculation and further research will be required in contrasting settings to determine the answer. The relatively random nature of student diversity, the rural location of the campus and the prominence of group work, accompanying teamwork and interaction are all features that would encourage the development of oral skills. Where these are absent, or less prominent, the findings may differ. Another topic of agreement amongst all interviewees was the importance of immersion in the English language and culture of UK higher education, although this was not necessarily within a Course Director's control. Despite this, the degree to which a student might engage with host language and culture was yet another consideration for inclusion in selection decisions.

10.2 The relationship between Summer Programme students' entry assessments and subsequent linguistic and academic progress

Whilst the varied selection practices within the institution produced rich data for analysis in the pilot and interview studies, it confounded intentions to compare students' entry test scores with subsequent academic trajectories and outcomes because of small student numbers. In addition, excluding NNES students without formal English entry test scores the variations would have resulted in the exclusion of several MSc programmes from the study so seriously limiting its scope.

The alternative option, which focused on the progress of the Summer Programme students, examined the progress of students identified as borderline in terms of English language skills. The results demonstrate that the group as a whole remained so throughout their degree studies, although the final degree results are unavailable at the time of writing. So far, nine out of 24 students have gained their Masters degrees, 14 have been instructed to revise and represent their theses and one student has failed to gain a MSc degree but may gain a PGDiploma, subject to passing an exam. Typically, around 10% of Summer Programme students do not gain MSc degrees so, provided all students pass their resubmitted theses, the pass rate is higher than anticipated.

These results show similarities with Banerjee's study (2005) of students who were considered to be 'at risk' by their Admissions Tutors on account of English language proficiency. In the Lancaster study, data were collected from eight 'at risk' students which showed that they suffered prolonged language difficulties and had less success in overcoming them than other NNES students. The data confirmed the judgements of the Admissions Tutors made at the time of selection, indicating that their diagnostic abilities to identify students who might struggle with Masters study were sound. The findings in the present study are directly analogous to the Lancaster study since the Summer Programme students constitute a comparative group to the 'at risk' students who also continue to experience language difficulties, especially in writing. The findings indicate that Cranfield staff involved in selection are equally able to identify students at risk from language problems.

Banerjee concluded that the 'at risk' group of students suffered in terms of extra study time and effort. The present study did not set out to reflect the student experience but did demonstrate that there were costs to teaching staff in terms of increased supervisory workload. Of the Summer Programme students, 11 were known, through supervisor's reports, to have difficulties with writing which impacted adversely upon thesis supervision whilst three were reported as having no difficulties with written language. The present study therefore upholds and extends Banerjee's findings by identifying costs from the teaching perspective.

Overall, the findings of the Summer Programme students' progress indicate that they represent a borderline group throughout their study both academically and linguistically. However, it is not possible with any certainty to gauge to what extent linguistic problems contribute to academic failure for an individual student within the group.

10.3 The consequences of different admission criteria and practices upon postgraduate students' academic progress

The final aim of the study sought to compare the consequences of different admission criteria and practices upon students' academic progress in a variety of courses. Because of small numbers it is not possible to determine differences at programme level but there are clear differences at School level. Distinctions between the three Schools in admission criteria and practices have already been discussed. Regarding academic progress, as measured by the need to redraft the thesis, students in SOM fared worse than students in the two other Schools. Of the six SOM students, five (83%) have been instructed to revise and represent their theses. For the 11 SAS students, one failed to gain a MSc award and six students (63%) are revising and representing their theses. For SOE, three out of seven students (42%) are revising their theses.

It appears that the more explicitly stringent are the admission criteria, the more likely are students with borderline English language skills to suffer academic setbacks. Taken at face value, the findings appear logical and predictable but there are caveats. One is the fact that the students with the lowest entry test scores (IELTS 5.5 and TOEFL IBT 64) are located in SOM. Conversely, the students in SOE have the highest entry test scores, three conforming to the institutional requirements (IELTS 6.5, TOEFL CBT 243 and TOEFL IBT 92). The differences could therefore be partially explained by variations in students' English language proficiency at entry. Another possibility is the effect of disciplinary differences. In a discipline where written text is prominent, such as Management studies, not only are stricter English language requirements more likely but so are the assessment standards of written work. This explanation would be supported by the greater number of comments about language on the exam scripts of SOM students than from any other School. However, this explanation is not as straightforward as it may seem. Many courses in the other Schools at Cranfield are interdisciplinary and incorporate content from management, scientific and technological domains. Examples of these have been included in the SAS and SOE programmes in the current research study.

Unfortunately, the small numbers urge caution in reaching robust conclusions for the relationship between School admission criteria and academic outcomes. Further research, probably longitudinal, will be necessary to tease out the varying contributions to borderline NNES students' academic progress.

11   CONCLUSION

This study has explored how NNES students are selected for admission to taught postgraduate Masters courses in a single UK HEI and followed the progress of a group of NNES students whose English language proficiency was identified as borderline on entry. The study took place against a background of public concern about the effects of increasing internationalisation upon academic literacy and degree standards in the UK.

The accompanying literature is limited but the findings support an earlier UK study in demonstrating that academic admissions staff employ complex selection rationales in which English test scores contribute but do not ultimately determine ultimate choices. Academic staff took into account an array of factors and circumstances in reaching a judgement of an applicant's potential to succeed at Masters level study. Schools differed in selection practices and the methods and criteria employed to assess an applicant's English language ability. Some Schools preferred English test scores while others employed assessment by specialist linguist staff. No single method or set of practices appeared to be more reliable than any other at identifying students who posed the greatest academic risk due to borderline English language proficiency. However, this finding requires confirmation with a larger scale study. There was some evidence that high demand for places on a specific programme could result in higher test score entry requirements and limit the intake of NNES students with borderline English language abilities.

The main concern amongst academic staff centred on writing standards, particularly in connection with the Masters thesis that students complete at the end of the programmes. The trajectories of students with borderline English language indicated that the writing skills of this group continued to cause concern. Over half of the group were required to revise and represent their theses and the writing abilities of just less than half were reported as adversely affecting the workload of their thesis supervisors. Supervisors of students who passed their theses on first submission also reported adverse effects upon their workloads. These findings and the general concern about writing standards suggest that the problem may extend beyond the small borderline student group which was the focus of the current study. If so, it calls into question the reliability of methods for assessing the writing abilities of NNES students on entry.

A limitation of the current research is the lack of evidence from students whose entry test scores satisfy but do not exceed entry requirements. Future research should examine the writing abilities of all NNES students on taught Masters programmes to ascertain the scope of the problem. The case study approach employed in the study warns against generalising these findings to other HEIs. However, there are similarities with an earlier UK study. There are opportunities for comparative case study research in contrasting settings such as urban locations, the undergraduate level and where there are different compositions of national groups, to test and develop the findings further.

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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR COURSE DIRECTORS

Nature and reasons for research project

Topic areas for discussion

Confidentiality

Audio-recording

Any queries?

Can you tell me something about the course you direct?

How long has it been offered?

Are there similar courses around the UK?

How many students do you admit?

How many students apply?

What is the employment rate of your graduates?

What type of employment do they enter?

In which countries do they work?

What is your experience of a. teaching on the MSc programme and b. as a Course Director?

In relation to English language proficiency, how do you select students on your course?

What factors do you consider when assessing an applicant's English language ability?

What evidence do you use in assessing an applicant's English language ability?

What features of a student's CV and background would prompt you to recommend the student takes the Summer Programme?

What part does English language testing (IELTS/TOEFL etc) play in selection and admission to your course?

Do you consider different language skills separately eg listening, speaking, reading and writing?

Do you admit students under the European Partnership Programme?

What are your views on current admission practices in relation to English language proficiency?

How could current selection and admission practices be improved?

What do you think are the educational consequences of mixed English language ability classes for

      a. non-native English speaking students?

      b. native English speaking students?

      c. teaching staff?

Can you describe the programme structure and its assessment?

Is English language assessed on the course? If so, how?

Have you observed problems in group projects related to mixed English language ability?

Sometimes student cohorts may include a large group of students who share a language other than English. Have you observed any educational consequences of this?

Native English speaking students may adopt specific roles in group projects such as proof reading and editing. What are your views on this?

Have you ever taught a non-native English speaking student who you thought might be dyslexic?

Have you recommended students for academic English support during the course?

What are your views on the web publication of Masters theses?

What are your views on the current ongoing provision of academic English support?

How could ongoing academic English provision be improved?

Would training for teaching staff in admissions and selection be helpful? If yes, what form should it take?

Thank you

APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Nature and reasons for research project

Topic areas for discussion

Confidentiality

Audio-recording

Any queries?

Tell me about your experience of postgraduate teaching (Cranfield and elsewhere)?

(particularly, any experience of teaching non-native English speakers)

Tell me about the new roles you are undertaking within the department?

What are you looking for in selecting students for a Masters course?

What evidence will you look for?

How will you assess English language ability?

Does the international mix of students at Cranfield affect learning and teaching?

More specifically:

      a. NNES students

      b. NES students

      c. teaching staff

      d. management of group projects

What do you know about existing English language support for students?

What are your views on the form English support for students should take?

Is there a place for training staff in the selection of non-native English speaking students?

Thank you

APPENDIX 3: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SUPERVISORS OF MASTERS THESES OF SUMMER PROGRAMME STUDENTS

Thank you for taking part in this survey which is part of an IELTS/British Council funded research study exploring the effects of students' English language proficiency on progress in selected Masters courses at Cranfield.

The survey aims to discover whether deficiencies in students' English language proficiency are reflected in thesis marking and supervisory workload.

The survey should take about 5 minutes to complete. Please answer the questions with reference to the supervision of the student named in the accompanying email.

Once you press the submit button you will not be able to edit your responses. All data will be treated confidentially and anonymised in future publication.

1. I am a thesis supervisor on the

Title of the Masters programme

2. Please enter the number of years you have been supervising MSc theses on this

programme.

3. Please enter the number of MSc theses you supervised in 2007/8.

4. My student's English language proficiency has contributed to the thesis mark.

Adversely   not at all   beneficially

If adversely, please specify:

5. My student's English language proficiency affected my supervisory workload

Adversely   not at all

If adversely, please specify:

6. Please provide any further information that you feel may be relevant to the topic

Thank you for responding to the survey

APPENDIX 4: SUPERVISORS' RESPONSES TO QUESTION 6 OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SUPERVISORS OF MASTERS THESES

SAS Supervisor: Students are informed that their thesis needs to be grammatically correct – and therefore to discuss all issues re their thesis with their supervisor at an early stage. The onus is on the student to ensure that they use the services of the supervisor, and each student is different in this respect.

SAS Supervisor: English language proficiency varies considerably among my students – as noted above for some European students it has been a problem.

SAS Supervisor: As I understand the role of supervisor we do not correct English. So unless they are minor mistakes then I suggest that they get a proof reader.

SOE Supervisor: Technical writing skills require a level of English which is not being currently met by the majority of overseas students I supervise both from the EU and outside. This somehow needs to be addressed before the students join the course.

SAS Supervisor: Her English was generally good.

SOM Supervisor: I would appreciate any "great solutions" but I guess we just have to live with this only downside of our truly international, multicultural groups of students.

SOM Supervisor: I encourage my students to write the introductory chapter early on. I am very critical of the English not just the content in this first chapter. From this I can advice the student if they should use a professional proof reader or not. I also inform them that I am not the proof reader.

SAS Supervisor: Whilst every support was made available, this was at times ignored. Corrected and acceptable parts were sometimes changed for no apparent reason leading to either further necessary corrections, or in the case of the final submission, some sub-standard parts.

SAS Supervisor: It is primarily the written thesis document where greater time input is required to resolve the English problems. This may require more than one iteration particularly if new text has to be added which in turn then needs correcting.

SAS Supervisor: I think it crucial that non-native English speakers work hard to make their written work as fluent as possible because, as a supervisor and examiner, it can often be difficult to discern those who have a thorough understanding of the science, but who just can't express it in fluent English, and those who are not really understanding the science.

SOM Supervisor: Because I spent a lot of time draft-reading the work, it meant that I spent relatively less time on the evaluation of the actual content of the work.

SOE Supervisor: The standard of English from China / Taiwan has improved in recent years although individual students will have variable skills.