

University English language centres: An emerging space for research

International student enrolments in university English language centres in Australia are driving our economy and yet international students are not well understood or supported by many in our Higher Education Sector (Australian Government, 2016). Within this \$1.845 billion export industry (English Australia, 2013), the third largest in Australia after iron ore and coal, 498,155 international students study at our tertiary institutions (Australian Government, 2016). This is a large proportion of the estimated 1.3 million students in total who study at 39 institutions (Universities Australia, 2015). Thirty-four of these universities operate English language centres to support international students in preparing for university. Twenty-six of these are members of University English Centres of Australia (UECA) – an association designed to support the specific needs of the English Language Centres with membership services, professional development, industry relations and research (University English Language Centres of Australia, 2016). UECA was founded in 1988 and has members across Australia, all English language centres belonging to Australian universities. Each year UECA runs two professional development fests focusing on teachers providing professional development for other teachers. This attracts 350 teachers annually.

In 2015, seventeen of the UECA member centres were benchmarked on scale, scope and relationship to their parent university (University English Language Centres of Australia, 2015). From this benchmarking we can draw conclusions about the impact that university English language centres have on the sector. In the 17 centres benchmarked, 24,490 students per annum studied 292,591 weeks of English language in the form of university preparation programs (University English Language Centres of Australia, 2015). Most universities have an enterprise relationship with their language centres, ranging from full ownership of the English language centre to third party arrangements such as joint ventures and subsidiaries. Benchmarked centre sizes ranged from 277 students to 3,189 students, with revenues from \$1.4million per annum to \$20.27million (University English Language Centres of Australia,

2015). These centres employ over 1,500 teachers nation-wide and offer testing services and stand-alone General English, short term customised programs and test preparation programs. The centres are regulated by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) against the National standards for English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) providers and courses (ELICOS Standards) and Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (ESOS Act). Many are quality assured by the National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS), a global leader in quality assurance for the English language teaching (ELT) sector. Most centres are also members of both English Australia and University English Centres of Australia (UECA), two industry member associations supporting such centres in Australia.

University English language centres are a vital part of the international student experience at the parent university, often conducting orientation services and helping students with accommodation, counselling and other critical services. The centres are where the students first experience Australia and the university (Davis & Mackintosh, 2012; University English Language Centres of Australia, 2015). Some of the centres are well funded, placed on the university campus and integral in the systems and processes of the parent university. Other centres are off campus and operate separately, use separate Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS) codes and have their own infrastructure and administration. Teachers in the centres are typically qualified at the Masters level, and sometimes at the PhD level. Many undertake action research and professional development. Centres provide strong professional development programs, engaging their staff in sometimes up to 50 hours per annum of centre-led professional development. The centres are active with presentations and workshops at annual conferences held by English Australia, NEAS, Australian International Education Conference (AIEC) and UECA Professional Development Fests (English Australia, 2015b).

The centres typically share common objectives. They contribute to recruitment and selection of international students for undergraduate, postgraduate and research degree programs at Australian universities. As the international student market increases dramatically, with Australian universities ranging from 10-45% of

their total student body comprised of international students (Olsen, 2014), this raises specific issues and opportunities. There is tension between expectations of the parent university and expectations of the teachers, students and their parents. With many universities relying on agents to promote their products internationally, there is also tension between growth and quality, which brings issues surrounding quality control (Olsen, 2014). External levers such as visa regulations, value of the Australian dollar, international markets and immigration policies impact university English language centres.

There are supporters of the university pathway experience and also critics. Issues on both sides of the argument are covered here to provide a background to the research papers in this edition.

Issues facing teachers in language centres often centre on contractual agreements made with the parent universities. Many of the universities operate on a separate Enterprise Bargaining Agreement for the English language teachers, often resulting in a lower rate of pay when compared to an academic. Teachers struggle with short-term contracts and quick cycles of enrolment contraction and expansion, creating high and low seasonal demands for work. This dynamic, coupled with education requirements for employment that are typically lower than university requirements for lecturers, can translate to a lack of respect from the academics the teachers need to collaborate with.

Issues facing students include a stressful orientation period, ongoing progression and attendance difficulties, high stakes examinations, parental and cultural pressure and different styles of learning. During orientation, international students need to find accommodation, support networks and information about banking, transportation and communications, often with a minimal amount of English language. They are then exposed to the parent university's systems and processes for student cards, library access, counselling, enrolment and materials distribution, most of which operate on a semester-based cycle, different to the English language centre's cycle of 5-10 week enrolments. Many students are undertaking long courses, often more than 25 weeks, which present issues with progression, ongoing assessment and level drift, whereby a small percentage of at-risk students may pass through the program unnoticed until the very end

of the pathway. They are faced with high stakes examinations prior to the semester starting and failure can mean delaying enrolment to their degree by six months or more and possibly returning back to their home country. There is a strong parental pressure to perform well; parents are often funding the study, and to return early is a loss of face many students cannot bear. Even if the student overcomes these initial barriers to their study, some are faced with entering degree programs with little English language support (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010).

Issues facing English language centres include operating on different timetables and shifts to the parent university, lack of cohesion with university strategy, view of the centre as the “cash cow” for the university and the threat of outsourcing. The parameters of the National Code and ESOS Act ensure international students in pathway programs must study for a minimum of 20 hours per week in a face-to-face mode. This is at odds with the university timetable, creating issues around resource allocation and space. The growth rate of the language centre can often be more than the university total student growth rate. This further compounds difficulties in retaining appropriate classrooms, staff and student support services.

Despite these difficulties, university English language centres continue to produce high quality students and play an important role in preparing students for university success. Teacher feedback at professional development events suggests that students studying at University English language centres experience a solid foundation and orientation. They also engage more with the community and contribute more to the academic and social fabric of the university by taking part in more clubs and social activities. They place less strain on resources. They are familiar with the university’s student resources, systems and processes. They have acculturated to Australia and the university way of life. International students especially bring dynamism and multicultural elements to the campus.

Proponents of English language centres say that they provide a valuable source of information to the Faculties about the students. Many English language centres provide sophisticated student profiles to their destination faculties. They work closely with the Faculties to ensure that students are trained in specific genres, techniques, tools

and attitudes relevant to the target degrees and specialty areas. Rather than being seen as a necessary external tool to help filter poor students, English language centres are leveraged by many universities to start development of students' academic skills before the degree has begun. Many centres follow the students through their degree and support not just English language development but also development of 21st century skills such as critical thinking, research skills, creativity and problem solving, ethics, digital literacies, leadership, openness and engagement.

At the forefront of all of these issues is research conducted on teaching and learning at university English language centres. Such research empirically investigates the key areas of debate outlined thus far, along with other specific issues faced by key stakeholders, and proposes the way forward for particular contexts and the industry as a whole. Within the context of the university, engagement in the enterprise of research on and by the centres provides an avenue for collaboration between academics and language teachers. It provides a space for mutual understanding of the unique issues facing centres and the way research approaches can help to understand these issues in a more fruitful way. For example, centres are undertaking research projects to track the academic outcomes of their graduates and parent universities are determined to understand early indicators of risk students and high-performing students (Arkoudis, 2010; Arkoudis, Baik, Richardson, & Marginson, 2012; University English Language Centres of Australia, 2015).

"Teacher research" is an emerging area for university English language centres to contribute to academic conversations (Borg & Sanches, 2015). Borg and Sanchez (2015) describe teacher research as "systematic self-study by teachers (individually or collaboratively), which seeks to achieve real-world impact of some kind and is made public" (p. 1). Developing in this area allows the centres to develop research profiles, which heightens credibility and integration with the parent university and the wider academic community. It also provides a rich, intellectually-stimulating avenue for teachers to develop professionally beyond day-to-day teaching practice. In pursuing research of this kind, teachers are encouraged to engage in academic enquiry around areas of interest in their practice and report on these findings to contribute to evidence-based development in

areas such as teaching methodology, curriculum and assessment.

However, pursuit of research at university English language centres is not without its challenges. Feasibility is the most pervasive roadblock to developing, conducting, and reporting on teacher research (Borg & Sanchez, 2015). Even highly motivated teacher researchers often face the challenge of having enough time to design and conduct research projects. In addition to time allocation for research, novice teacher researchers often need training in particular methods of data collection and analysis, as well as access to mentoring. Given the benefits for both teachers and centres, successful completion of research at university English language centres requires support and encouragement from both the wider industry and other centres (Edwards & Burns, 2016).

At the industry level, research in the centres is supported by several key players. English Australia and Cambridge English Language Assessment have supported the Action Research in ELICOS Program since 2010. This program is conducted under the guidance of Anne Burns, an academic with expertise in a wide range of ELT research areas, including action research. The program goals include research skill development and sharing research outcomes through conference presentations and publication. As a result of this program, more than 50 teachers have published the findings of their research (English Australia, 2015a). University English Centres of Australia (UECA) has supported the CamTESOL Regional Research Symposium in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, linking teacher researchers in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region to teachers at English language centres throughout Australia for support and co-publishing. These programs demonstrate the benefit of providing formalised mentoring and collaboration opportunities for teacher researchers.

On a more local level, centres can support research through the development of active communities of practice that allow teachers to collaborate to pursue avenues of research (Burns, 2015). At the University of Sydney Centre for English Teaching in Sydney, a recent focus on promoting research activities has resulted in the establishment of a Research Working Group, a committee that works on formalising research processes at the centre and supporting teachers in navigating aspects of the research process, such as

developing research proposals and applying for human ethics approval. This support is provided through a professional development workshop series and discussion group where budding and experienced teacher researchers can share the progress of projects and discuss the implications of existing research for their teaching practice. These initiatives have resulted in a vibrant culture of research at the centre, with clear pathways and readily available support for teachers interested in participating in research at a variety of levels.

This Special Issue was supported by a workshop series on writing for publication for submitting authors from centres Australia-wide, in collaboration with Brian Paltridge, General Editor of this journal. This is yet another example of how support through training and professional development can lead to progress in research and publication.

It is in this context that the five following papers are presented. Written by teachers who have worked in university English language centres or by researchers who have a keen interest in the teaching and learning that occurs in the centres, they explore evidence-based practice occurring in the sector today. This issue of the *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL* is an important one as it explores one of the key differentiating factors of centres that are owned or managed by Australian universities. They speak to the currency of the universities – research. Many stakeholders of the centres look for evidence in determining the validity, credibility and sustainability of university English language centres in Australia. The five papers presented in this edition are proof of the excellence of the work that is being done by teachers and staff in the centres and those stakeholders that work closely with them. In publishing these articles, this special issue responds to Anne Burns' call to recognise the importance of this area of research through publication (Burns, 2016).

Luke Alexander's contribution to the issue looks at performance management of teachers at university English language centres. Focussing on narratives in a performance review interview, he investigates the way teacher identity is positioned, contested and developed in and through interaction between the teacher and reviewer. These dynamics are situated in the complex context of a rapidly-changing Australian TESOL industry, which brings with it changes in expectations of teachers. Alexander's analysis brings a more nuanced understanding

of this kind of institutional interaction in a language centre.

Bronwen Dyson presents the results of a collaborative study between a university English language centre, the university learning centre and a university faculty. This study compares pedagogical practices in two different courses at the English language centre. Dyson discusses the implications for using English for Academic Purposes and genre-based approaches on students' ability to write academic assignments that are appropriate for the university, as well as student perceptions of the efficacy of these approaches. This study contributes to our understanding of the rationale for particular pedagogical approaches at university English language centres.

English language tests as university gateways have been studied from a variety of perspectives. John Gardiner and Stephen Howlett engage with the perspectives of a particular stakeholder: the students who take these tests. Participants in the study took four different tests that are accepted by Australian universities for entry. Their perceptions of the test-taking experience and the test-item and skill types were gathered through focus groups, and recurrent themes from their responses are presented. Gardiner and Howlett's findings provide insights that can be of particular benefit to centres providing test preparation courses.

In her contribution, Meredith MacAulay looks at students' transition from university English language centres to their university courses. Focussing on academic speaking skills, she uses interview data to investigate the tasks required of students in their master's programs and students' perception of transfer of related skills from their Direct Entry English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program. This leads to an informative discussion on the nature of transfer and implications for teachers and course designers on the design and facilitation of such programs.

Aurora Murphy's contribution considers art as an alternative to comprehension questions for engaging students with reading texts. Through her presentation of cycles of action research, she takes us through a teaching approach that aims to engage lower-level students with developing and articulating their understanding of complex texts through the creation of artworks and dramatisation of the content. This article provokes thought around previously under-explored teaching approaches for engaging students with academic literacies.

In reflecting on the special issue as a whole, these contributions focus on a diverse range of issues, through a variety of methodological and analytical approaches. It is our hope that they can build our understanding of key issues relevant to university English language centres and inspire future research in this context.

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Patrick Pheasant, Director at the University of Sydney Centre for English Teaching, brings enthusiasm and a healthy pragmatism to boards, projects and teams he engages with. With 23 years' experience in applying drama, TESOL and teacher training methodologies across ELICOS, high school, vocational education, higher education and corporate sectors in Japan, the Netherlands, the United States and Australia, Patrick's recent doctoral research at the University of Sydney is in using process drama in TESOL. Patrick is the current Vice-President of University English Centres of Australia (UECA) and is a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. He is the current convenor of the NEAS Advisory Board.

Lydia Dutcher is Education Manager (Graduate Programs) at the University of Sydney Centre for English Teaching. She collaborates with the university faculties to manage and design evidence-based curricula for the centre's units of study and develops professional development programs for research skills. Lydia is currently engaged in doctoral research that integrates classroom interaction, mixed-ability classroom contexts, and the way groups of people carry out joint action through talk.

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