

# **More than just grammar: A collaborative project assessing, addressing and tracking the transition needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students at UTAS**

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**Abstract:** Domestic CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) students straddle 'Internationalisation' and Bradley-related reforms and face significant challenges in their transition to higher education. This two year study at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), incorporating student interviews and testing and tracking the results of CALD students, while supporting the necessity for pre-entry English language testing for this group and suggesting a level of English proficiency that can be determined pre-entry and below which students are set up to fail, also contests the reduction of these challenges to 'language' issues. It reveals a more complex process of transition that faces the CALD cohort in their adaption to a new cultural, social and linguistic environment. Excerpts from transcripts of CALD student interviews are used to give a strong student perspective on this transition. The narrow notion of a language proficiency deficit suggests something that can be discretely tested for and supported outside the classroom; in contrast, the more complex process of cultural adjustment revealed in this study clearly requires a broader institutional response, incorporating curricular and co-curricular elements. A number of cultural elements have an influence on the acquisition of academic literacies that form a significant, though often hidden, part of the curriculum. From this understanding, recommendations will be made in relation to approaches to supporting the successful transition of this cohort and the paper will argue that project findings have implications for the effective and sustainable support of both International and 'participation' (Bradley and related reforms) cohorts.

**Keywords:** CALD cohort, transition, English language testing

## **Introduction**

Domestic CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) students uniquely straddle ‘Internationalisation’ and Bradley related reforms. It is often thought that *the* key factor in the success or failure of CALD and International students is proficiency in grammar and spelling. This offers only a partial picture of a complex process of transition to a new cultural, social and linguistic environment. This is important, as a focus on the purely linguistic lends itself to a discourse in which the skills deficit can be discretely tested and supported outside the classroom. Viewed as a more complex process of adjustment, the situation requires an institution-wide response to supporting students through this process of cultural transition. For, in addition to the cultural adjustment to the physical and social space of the university (centrally supportable), there are a number of academic literacies that form a significant, though often hidden, part of the curriculum. This is of clear import to participation agendas under which it can no longer be assumed that students (diverse in fluency in other cultural domains) are prepared specifically for a university environment.

The focus of this paper is a study in the testing and support of CALD students at UTAS. We firstly outline the features of the cohort in comparison to International students. We then present the results of English proficiency testing, showing academic results tracked for 50 students over two to three semesters and unpack the elements of the testing process that are not purely ‘language’ based, relating to cultural norms of Australian universities and wider settlement pressures. We then demonstrate, using literature and student interviews, that these ‘cultural’ skills may not have been acquired by CALD students during previous education. The interview excerpts allow the student voice, so often missing in these discussions, to emerge strongly. Our argument is that language proficiency is *a* key factor in determining capacity for academic success, that it can be measured centrally, within limitations, and that admitting unprepared students is unethical as they are set up to fail. However, transition issues for this cohort are broader, and it is only by making these culturally specific skills visible, through conscious curriculum design and teaching strategies in conjunction with closer ties to central support services, that we will adequately support not just this, but many ‘non-traditional’ cohorts.

## **Who are CALD students and how do they enter university?**

The CALD cohort comprises two main groups: voluntary migrants and humanitarian entrants. The nominal cut-off period for both groups for UTAS CALD service purposes is 10 years post entry. The two groups have areas of overlap, but also considerable differences. Language issues, differences between previous and Australian education systems (and therefore skill sets and expectations), broader settlement pressures, and family pressure towards higher education are common to the two groups – though the ways in which these manifest are not identical between the two groups, or sometimes even subgroups within them.

Humanitarian entrants, due to the fact that resettlement has been forced upon them rather than planned and prepared for, often feel settlement pressures more keenly and for a longer duration, stemming from the past torture and trauma events and broken nature of schooling that often accompany the refugee journey (Kaplan, 1998). The humanitarian entrant cohort combine this broken, ‘non-traditional’ educational preparation with strong aspirations towards higher education. Unlike first in family or low Socio Economic Status (SES) students, whose peer, parental and broader community attitudes temper and may undermine aspirations towards higher education, humanitarian entrant communities are firmly focused on making

use of the opportunity for higher education that resettlement makes possible, though their previous education and short time of adjustment to Australia often leaves this aspiration divorced from a realistic understanding of how to enact it (Hingston & Sweeney, 2007). This creates a climate in which higher education is aimed for and entry sought as soon as possible, often without the requisite preparation, a situation the visa entitlements of a permanent humanitarian visa allow (both Commonwealth Supported Places [CSP] and the Higher Education Contribution Scheme [HECS]/ FEE HELP loan is available on entry, rather than the four year wait for the HECS/HELP component for other visa classes). This creates an ‘enforced’ settlement period for most permanent entrants in which broader settlement issues can be worked through, language developed and adjustments made to ‘western education’ through college or university preparation programs. While the lack of waiting time is of significant benefit to those students in a position to successfully undertake higher education shortly after arrival, when combined with the discrepancy between aspiration and preparedness, it creates an unintended risk to gradual and realistic pathways to degree level studies.

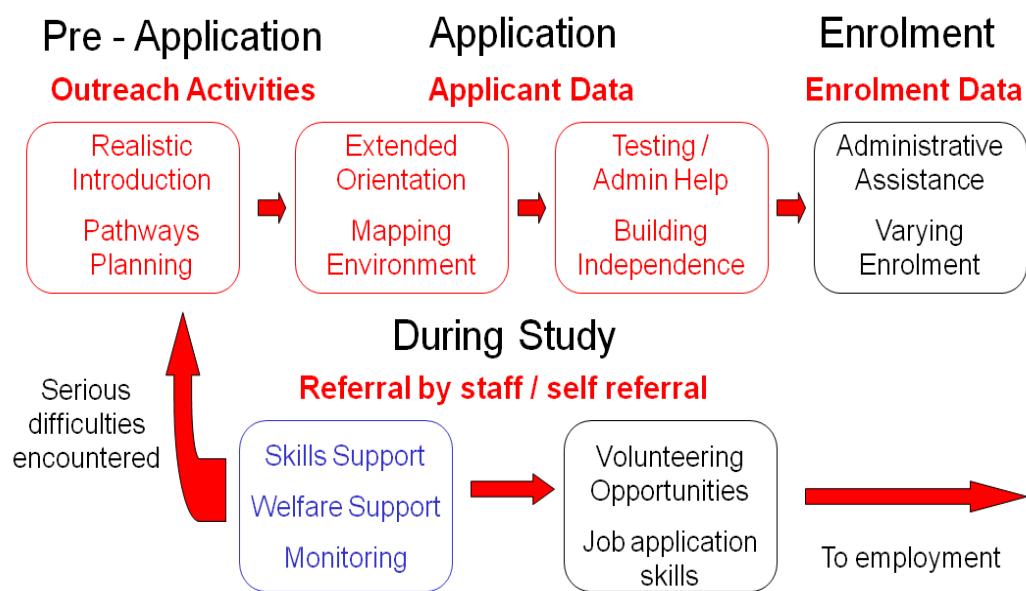
National legislation shaping entrance policy at Australian universities provides one of the most important elements necessitating the CALD support program. By federal law university entry for international students (those on student visas) is dependent on previous studies and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) scores. Minimum benchmarks are set nationally, with requirements for individual courses set at or above those limits by individual faculties (a fact often not understood by many teaching staff perturbed by the language levels exhibited in the international students). By contrast, permanent visa classes are not distinguished on a national or state level for university entrance purposes. As such, this group is assessed by the general and course specific entrance requirements of all domestic applicants – a process that takes neither English language development nor other settlement pressures into account. These issues are only taken into account indirectly, through Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) success or tertiary equivalents assessed through the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition database. Due to this and the complex of factors outlined above, humanitarian entrants constitute one of the highest groups at risk of failure and attrition at UTAS (Rienks & Taylor, 2009).

### **UTAS Response – the CALD program**

The testing project which is the main focus of this paper forms part of the CALD support program (see figure 1, below). The scope of the program offers pre-admission to post-graduation support - significantly wider than most ‘transition’ programs. The aim of its accent on early identification of clients is a comprehensive ‘transition assessment’; a voluntary series of meetings, of which written testing forms a part, and which simultaneously serve to assess the readiness of potential students while orienting them to the tertiary environment. The extent to which the above factors will impinge on studies is assessed, worked through and used in conjunction with the written test results as points of diagnosis and leverage to guide an individual towards a sustainable pathway. Due to the cohort’s potential low levels of preparation coupled with strong aspirations towards higher education, the voluntary, non-binding nature of this advice, finite resources and the necessity for trust to be built up if advice contrary to a desire to begin tertiary study immediately is to be followed, this process is imperfect and does not capture all incoming students (distance, late enrolling and mainland applicant students are of particular difficulty).

UTAS now has one of the largest cohorts of humanitarian entrant students in the country, due to high per-capita settlement in Tasmania, currently around 600 students, roughly half of whom are humanitarian entrants (University of Tasmania, 2010). While the service proactively seeks clients before and during application, due to imperfections in the data, we remain reliant on self and faculty referral to identify clients who have not correctly indicated their country of birth and first language on their application forms. We currently meet around half of the total CALD cohort - a large percentage of these clients representing the higher risk, recently-arrived humanitarian entrant group. Despite the challenges and limitations, this process has met with increasing success with a growing number of students following advice and performing better in their studies overall (Hingston & Sweeney, 2009).

## The CALD Programme & the Student Lifecycle



Testing and advice window 1 (pre-entry) Window 2 (usually after poor results in a given semester)

**Figure 1 – The CALD model**

### The EnglishAssist English proficiency test for CALD students

#### Rationale

For CALD students who are identified early (see figure 1) an optional English proficiency test is available. Although we dispute the view that English language proficiency is the *only* factor in the academic success of CALD students, it is undoubtedly the case that where English is the medium of instruction and assessment, proficiency is of central importance. This is acknowledged in the first of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency (GPP) which states that it is the responsibility of universities to ensure that students are ‘sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their studies’ (DEEWR, 2009). While the GPP document was developed with international students in mind, it cannot be assumed that all students from the other non-traditional cohorts described above will be ‘sufficiently competent’ in English. Nationally, early identification of students whose language proficiency is inadequate is seen

as crucial, and is achieved either through early low-stakes assessment tasks, and/or through tests or ‘tools’ made available to students as early as possible in their courses (Dunworth, 2009).

The aim of our test is to assess English proficiency in an academic context. Students whose proficiency is at an appropriate standard are offered extra environmental orientation and skills support within their degree (available options include UniStart, Peer Assisted Study Sessions [PASS], Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching [CALT] learning skills sessions and individual consultations and workshops with EnglishAssist). Those whose English proficiency is borderline, or who are unfamiliar with key academic skills such as how to structure an argument or use sources to support claims, are advised to enroll in the University Preparation Program (UPP); and those whose English proficiency is at a level not yet appropriate for UPP are advised to undertake further English study before entering university.

### ***Design of the assessment***

We understand language proficiency in the broad sense supported by the AQUA GPP document, which defines proficiency as:

the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies ... This view of English language as the ability to organise language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of English language proficiency from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure. (DEEWR, 2009, p. 1)

To be proficient in a language means to be able to use it to communicate appropriately in particular contexts; it involves, but extends beyond, having knowledge of grammar and sentence structures. Thus the design of our test reflects the kind of communication tasks commonly encountered within degree programs. Students read a short academic-style text on a topic of general interest, and then write an essay in response to a question based on the topic of the text. The essays are assessed using a criterion referenced assessment (CRA) sheet. The assessment criteria include: aspects of proficiency with the discourse structures of academic writing (task focus, essay structure, cohesion); lexico-grammatical competence (vocabulary range, vocabulary accuracy, grammar range, grammar accuracy); strategic competence (communicative competence); and sociolinguistic competence with particularly academic functions (academic register, incorporation of source material, and referencing). A score from A+ to E is possible for each criterion, and descriptors for each level are provided in the CRA. Students scoring below C are regarded as not ready for the language requirements of university study, while students scoring C are strongly advised to undertake UPP units in Written Communication before entering degree programs.

### ***Results and evaluation of the test***

The test has now been run for four cohorts of students (entry Semesters 1 & 2, 2008 and 1 & 2, 2009). In total, 47 students have been tested, and 44 of these enrolled. In order to evaluate the success of the test, students’ results for all units were collated and correlated with test scores. There is a strong correlation between level of English proficiency identified by the test and academic success as shown in figure 2 below. Thus it is of concern that 14 students below the cut-off score (C) enrolled in 2008/9. Some surprising successes by students scoring E were reviewed. One had scored ‘E’ because there was not enough original writing to assess and another student failed a unit with an essay-writing component, but did well in language units which do not require essay writing. Overall, however, the test supports the view that a

gate-keeping test for all non-English speaking background students is advisable. In the interests of equity and transparency, an independent and internationally recognised test such as IELTS is the most appropriate in the long term.

RESULT ON TEST	Total number of enrolling tested students = 44	LEVEL OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS			
		Pass or above in all units	Failing 1 unit /year	Failing 2 + units/year	Withdrawn from all units
	A (Total number of enrolments = 1)	1 (100%)	0	0	0
	B (Total number of enrolments = 11)	7 (63%)	2 (18%)	2 (18%)	0
	C (Total number of enrolments = 18)	9 (50%)	2 (11%)	4 (22%)	3 (16%)
	D (Total number of enrolments = 11)	0 (0%)	3 (27%)	5 (45%)	3 (27%)
	E (Total number of enrolments = 3)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	0

**Figure 2: Comparison of academic success and EnglishAssist test result**

### Other transition factors

#### ***Limitations: discipline specific***

One of the limitations of our test, and of centrally delivered language and academic skills support, is that it is very difficult to encompass the diversity of discipline-specific approaches to knowledge, argument and communication. Thus a model of academic literacy, in addition to English proficiency, has been developed. Murray (2010) gives the University of Western Australia's definition of academic literacy: "the capacity to undertake study and research, and to communicate findings and knowledge, in a manner appropriate to the particular disciplinary conventions and scholarly standards expected at university level" (p. 58). This model covers not only the specific linguistic skills required for the production of texts, but also the thinking and research processes that lie behind them. Successful academic writing requires critical thinking, research, reading and note-taking, planning, ordering, drafting and revising skills (Davis & McKay, 1996, p. 1) – as well as understanding of specialist vocabulary and concepts and of styles of constructing and contesting argument. These skills are tied to the kinds of thinking, research and communication practices valued by particular disciplines, and thus are often referred to as academic literacies. (Rex & McEachen, cited in Murray, 2010, p. 59). The corollary of this is a growing body of research suggesting that such skills are core academic business, and are most effectively taught when they are made explicit and taught within the content of courses and units (e.g., AALL, 2009; Kift, 2008).

### ***Limitations: cultural modes of learning***

It may be the case that some CALD students are skilled in approaches to thinking and communication which are very different from those expected of students in Australian universities. There is a considerable body of research (e.g. Kutieleh & Egege, 2004; Nisbett & Norenzayan, 2002), into the influence of cultural background on learning style and patterns of thinking and communication. The role of culture can be simplified and overemphasised, producing either an essentialist view that ignores other influences that will cause differences within a cultural group (e.g., age, gender, previous education level, literacy in other languages, existing content knowledge) – or a somewhat colonialist view that regards non-Western cultures as deficient in skills such as critical thinking that are assumed to be universally relevant and valuable. Nevertheless, formative experiences in cultures which may give quite different values to oral versus written communication, which may feature different rhetorical structures and approaches to persuasive argument, which may conceptualise the respective roles of the teacher and student quite differently, and which emphasise group, rather than individual, responsibility for learning, may produce sets of skills, approaches and expectations at odds with the prevailing culture of Australian academia.

The aim of this paper is not to add to this debate in a theoretical way, but rather to let two UTAS CALD students give their perspectives on the cultural aspects of transition. The two students we interviewed for this paper are both African humanitarian entrants. Both students regularly access various support services, and are doing well in the first year of their degrees. Australian cultural content in courses, reading, critical thinking, task analysis, attitudes towards experts and teachers, and expectations about the role of the student emerged as strong themes in both interviews. Both were at pains to point out that there are considerable differences among the cohort of African students with respect to country of origin, languages spoken, age (both on entry to university and on arrival in Australia), and previous education experiences, and that all of these things have a bearing on transition experiences.

The use of specifically Australian content and examples in lectures, tutorials and assignments will cause difficulty for students who have only been in the country for a short time. Our two interviewees differed in their approach to this. Student A, being mature-age and a fluent oral communicator, felt confident to contrast his own experiences with specifically Australian ones when this was relevant to the content of the tutorial. However Student B, a younger student, felt excluded when Australian examples about which he had no knowledge were being discussed, and preferred not to participate: “If material is orientated to the Australian culture you just feel like no, I don’t know much about it and I don’t want to say stupid things.” He understood that these familiar examples are very helpful to local students, but commented that it placed an extra burden on non-local students who had to acquire the information. This is particularly problematic where assignment tasks require knowledge of a local example or situation that has not been covered in classes.

There is a difference in the relative importance of written and oral communication within cultures. Some students from some African backgrounds may be very fluent and confident oral communicators, but be very unfamiliar with the experience of reading intensively.

Student A painted an evocative picture of this:

Where I came from, we do not have much pleasure in academic activities like reading intensively. [However], when you go to Childcare here, a one-year old child will be taught how to read, and by the time they grow up with that in them it is a part of them, from a very [early] level to their university level it’s almost in their blood. [But] when I was growing up, my grandfather used to put us in a circle, and tell us ancient stories and how things used to happen, and we listened to it. But I never grew up with reading.

The difficulty is compounded when private, individual activities like reading are viewed negatively:

I would rather listen to people, and share with them what I know than sit down privately and concentrate [on a book]... in Africa people are so interconnected, but here people are so individualistic.

This can mean that keeping up with reading loads is a heavy burden for some students, and suggests approaches to reading effectively and critically cannot be assumed. In contrast, Student B, who has a less disrupted prior education than Student A, had already acquired these skills before arriving in Australia. Although stressing the extra time that reading and writing in an additional language take, he was using appropriate reading strategies and was prepared to tolerate some ambiguity – reading the first time for overall meaning, and then going back to the important details.

The expectation that important information will be conveyed orally in person, rather than through a written document, had implications for the way unit outlines were viewed. Both our interviewees had become adept at using unit outlines to plan ahead, but said that other students in their cohort did not view this kind of written information as important and were likely to wait for verbal instructions from the lecturer before starting assignments. Student A: “If I didn’t understand how the culture works, I would just keep [the unit outline], thinking that when the time comes they will tell us to read it.”

The view that while reasoning may be universal, the types of critical thinking and writing required at Australian universities are culturally specific (e.g., Kutieleh & Egege, 2004) was one supported by our interviewees. Both students said that it takes them considerable time working out what an essay question is asking them to do. New vocabulary and concepts were factors in this, but training in Western critical thinking was also regarded as necessary in order to approach assignment questions. Student B:

Australian questions have two parts: do you agree or not, and show me why. In Africa it was much more – this is the way it is. You don’t have to ask yourself is it true or false, am I against or for this argument. This is a big difference... Expressing your ideas through writing was not as big a part, it was much more get the lecturer’s information and summarise it.

The process of analysing assignment tasks was also complicated by expectations about the role of the teacher. Student A:

When I came [to UTAS], I was a big problem to [the lecturers], because I always asked them “This is what you say we should do, how do you want me to do it?” Because I had the focus and the belief that they are the only prophet that will tell me the truth... and this is a cultural thing, and to deviate or move away from that view as a student, to take things into my own hands is a challenge. ... We are not used to critically thinking by ourselves as students. And here in this culture as university students it is really good to have an independent way of doing things, but if you are not brought up with it it’s just very difficult.

This respect for the teacher meant that he expected that all the information necessary for assignments would be given in lectures, and was not at first aware of the need for independent research:

Because of the culture I grew up in, many of us will put more trust in the lecture notes, we believe that the lecture notes have got all the material that we need to learn, because we grew up with the cultural belief that the lecturer will give us everything... whereas what I have started now to observe is the lecture notes is just a pathway for students.

Such respect for authorities can also lead to a situation where students are reluctant to paraphrase or critique information from lectures or from other sources. Plagiarism is regarded in Western academic culture as showing a lack of respect for the work of others. For students from some cultural backgrounds however, it is changing or criticising the words of an expert that is regarded negatively, and this can lead to an over-reliance on quotes or extensive summary.

I grew up with that belief that the lecturer has everything... if I go beyond what he says I will be penalised. Sometimes I think "No, he said it, it should be like that". In my essays you see long quotations and it's actually a problem. I do try to avoid using them but I tell myself "It should be like that. If I change it they will penalise me." All this is due to cultural differences.

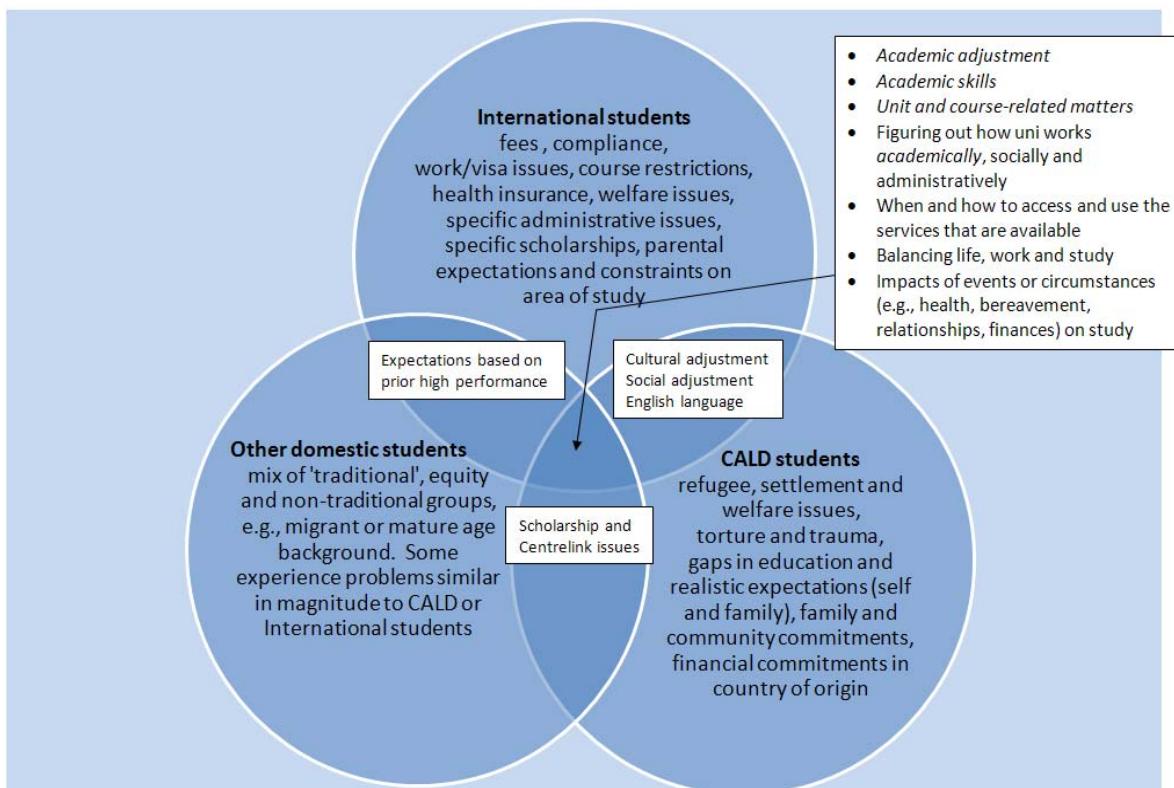
Thus while some difficulties with paraphrasing are due to the linguistic complexities of the task, there is also a cultural transition factor involved. When students have a long training in the role of the student being to absorb and transmit information passed to them by experts, adapting to Western cultural practices requires firstly that these practices are made explicit, and secondly that training in the necessary skills is provided.

#### ***Limitations: settlement factors outside study***

Of course, written testing has limits and many of the factors impinging on the ability of CALD students to transition successfully to university must be otherwise assessed. Family and community obligations; the impact of ongoing physical and mental health issues; learning to self-manage finances; securing adequate housing; ongoing anxieties and financial demands from family members still in want (and sometimes danger) in their countries of origin; and the ability to self-manage compliance with government agency (e.g., Centrelink) regulations are some of the factors that can exert significant pressure on studies. In a situation in which the extra workload required for successful transition places all but the most prepared students in a precarious position between coping and being overwhelmed, these external pressures have to be identified in advance and carefully managed.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

We have shown that not only a complex range of linguistic skills, but also other factors such as the settlement process, and different expectations and approaches resulting from culture and previous educational experiences all play a role in successful transition by CALD students. It is common for academic and central support staff to feel overwhelmed at the diversity of students attending a contemporary Australian university. International, CALD, low SES, first in family, mature aged, and disability cohorts all present unique prior contexts to the university environment and seemingly unique and disparate needs that must be met. Perhaps one of the most exciting learnings arising from this study and from the several years working with CALD clients as part of a broader team of central support staff, are the similarities between cohorts. It is evident that many students struggle with issues that arise from differences between university and other ethnic and learning cultures and the broader culture outside tertiary environments in Australia. Therefore, many of the strategies we suggest below should not be entirely new and feature prominently in the literature of First Year transition that focuses on low SES groups (Kift, 2009) and the UTAS First Year Framework. Figure 3 collates common issues arising across the whole range of central support services at UTAS, and graphically illustrates the overlap that exists within complexity. Those issues that relate to administrative or welfare issues have been left in standard text, while those relating to teaching and learning have been italicised.



**Figure 3 : Overlap in transition issues between cohorts**

In the continued absence of a compulsory and binding pre-admissions English proficiency test, and in the light of the other factors in academic transition, early low-stakes assessment before the census date can identify students who are likely to struggle, and be used to direct them to appropriate supports or pathways. The key to this timely intervention is a close working relationship between learning, transition support and academic staff.

Within units, the provision of models of good practice in thinking and writing is of great value to students (indeed, it is often more helpful than lengthy written explanations of task requirements). These are particularly valuable when coupled with tutorial or MyLO (My Learning Online – the UTAS online learning system) activities where the features of the model are analysed, and the processes by which the texts have been constructed are scaffolded. Non-traditional cohorts also benefit from explanation of the ‘rules of engagement’ within the university – the responsibilities of teacher and student, and how and when to approach lecturers for advice, and these explanations are most likely to be successful when written information is supported by verbal explanation. It is helpful for CALD and International students in particular if lecturers are aware of their use of highly idiomatic language and local cultural references. Activities that encourage knowledge-sharing before a task can help ensure that everyone is ‘on the same page’, make use of the perspectives CALD and International students can bring to a classroom and promote engagement between local and other students. The full integration of students from a diverse range of culture, language and experiential backgrounds allows all at UTAS the opportunity to view our own cultural assumptions from a different viewpoint, and adds to the richness of university life for both students and teachers.

While we must remain cognisant of the complexities and need for tailored responses to the diversity of the modern Australian university, we also believe that this strongly suggests a

model in which, in tandem with the necessity for greater awareness of and closer links to specialist support services, there is a fertile middle ground in which academic staff can deploy some of the teaching and learning strategies mentioned above to the benefit of a broad cross section of ‘International’ and ‘equity’ cohorts – diversity that if treated wholly in isolation, threaten to overwhelm teaching staff with contrary demands.

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