

English language needs and support: International ESL students' perceptions and expectations

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This paper reports the preliminary findings of a survey of international ESL students' perceptions and expectations of English language learning needs and support at the University of Melbourne. The cultural, social and academic challenges that international ESL students face when studying at the tertiary level in Australia are now well documented. Research to date, however, has focused on international students' academic and personal experiences of studying at English-speaking universities. The contribution of the present study is to further document commencing students' expectations and perceptions, specifically in the area of English language learning and support.

In February 2005, 377 international ESL students completed a 50-item questionnaire about their perceptions of their English language proficiency and the need for further development; and their expectations regarding forms and levels of language support. The data indicate that this group of students have high expectations with respect to academic results, even when they think their current English language skills are not adequate for them to perform well. It is also evident that students expect a far wider range of support measures for ESL learners than is currently offered at the University of Melbourne.

The findings of the study indicate a significant gap between international ESL students' expectations and current university support services for ESL learners. This will contribute to the difficulties that international students face unless comprehensive measures are developed and implemented to ensure students' expectations of English language support are more accurately aligned with the realities of tertiary study at the University of Melbourne.