

# Preparation counts

Academic preparation courses in Australia are popular with students going on to higher education in a variety of different countries. **Bethan Norris** reports.

Because of the cultural, language and academic differences found between students' home countries and their education destination, academic preparation courses can be vital. The wide variety of preparation courses on offer in Australia mean that students with differing needs and goals are catered for.

'I think that academic preparation courses are crucial for international students,' says Sawzan Salah, General Manager at Access Language Centre in Sydney, which offers a full-time academic English programme as well as an IELTS preparation course. 'Academic English is quite specific and requires a certain level of formality and text structures whether in spoken or written communication.' Moreover, Salah adds, these programmes also serve as an orientation to the educational system in Australia, the academic conventions and the academic culture in Australian institutions.

The goal of an academic preparation course for most students is to ensure a smooth transition into higher academic life in a different country, and, depending on a student's academic and cultural background, this can involve focusing on different areas and levels of English training.

Gary Smith, Executive Director at Pacific Gateway International College in Brisbane, believes that the importance of an academic preparation course varies greatly depending on a student's nationality. 'Most Eastern European, Western European and South American students have a fairly high communicative ability already and what they require for entrance to a university is an appropriate IELTS test score and improved writing and critical thinking skills,' he says. 'Asian students, on the other hand, require a great deal more training in communication and discussion skills to develop their ability to participate more effectively.'

Tang Feng Lou, from the Shanghai International Students Placement Council in China, has seen increasing numbers of Chinese students enrolling on academic preparation course in Australia in recent years. '[The academic preparation courses help students] to understand the two countries' cultural differences better and get themselves accustomed to life there as soon as possible,' he says. 'This course helps them lay a solid foundation for their later higher education.'

Many institutions offering academic preparation courses in Australia divide their courses into those concentrating solely on exam preparation techniques to fulfil university entry requirements, and general English for academic purposes



PHOTOGRAPH: PACIFIC GATEWAY INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE

(EAP) courses. These EAP courses are popular with students who already have the required exam grades but want to become more familiar with a new academic culture.

Students often find that enrolling on an EAP course at the same university where they will eventually study is particularly helpful. Lynne Stevens, Director of Marketing and International Relations at the University of Queensland Foundation Year in Spring Hill, says, 'For many students, this is their first opportunity to learn to fully use a computer, to undertake research projects and to become used to presenting seminars to fellow students - skills Australian students have been learning for years.'

However, the future plans of a student often dictate the course they choose. HHH Language Centre in Brisbane offers courses in IELTS preparation, Cambridge exam preparation, TOEFL preparation and EAP, and Jacqueline White, International Officer at the centre, says, 'Students from all over the world who wish to study in Australia or the UK must take the IELTS exam and therefore choose preparation courses for this exam. Students wishing to study or live in the USA would definitely prefer the TOEFL exam preparation course. Many European students choose Cambridge exam preparation courses as this exam is highly valued throughout Europe and the UK.'

Salah says that students are always advised to undertake a general tertiary preparation programme before embarking on an IELTS preparation course, so they gain 'holistic preparation for further studies'. She adds, 'In most cases, students are in a hurry to get into their mainstream programme [so] they opt to do the IELTS course only and, as a result, are not properly prepared for life in a university.'

## Seeking advice

Ensuring that students choose an academic preparation course that is right for them can be difficult due to the varied goals of each student. Many institutions in Australia rely heavily on education consultants to ensure that each student receives the most comprehensive advice.

Sawzan Salah, General Manager at Access Language Centre in Sydney, says, 'Ninety-five per cent of our students find us through agents. We believe that agents play a crucial role in providing accurate information and, as a result, we refer direct enquiries to our partner agencies in the country where the enquiry has come from.'

According to Sophia Liu, from the Sino-American Education Service Center in Taiwan, Taiwanese students find academic preparation courses helpful but she says, '[Courses that are too long] make students feel [like they] waste time. They usually like an intensive course.'