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## The Chair – Andrew Norton

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*We need more independent information about student prospects and performance, writes **Andrew Norton**.*

Victoria's Ombudsman has again published a report alleging problems with the way universities admit and assess international students.

The core complaint is that students are enrolled without adequate English-language proficiency. From that follows changes to the way students are assessed. Methods that require written English are dropped in favour of group work and multiple-choice tests. And sometimes, it is claimed, international students are "soft marked" — given a pass when they should fail, or given a higher grade than their work warrants.

Many academics report problems with the written and spoken English of international students — not all of them, but enough for it to be a practical teaching issue. Consistent with what academics say, the Ombudsman quotes from letters he received from international students. Their English is well below the standard universities should expect from their students.

Other sources support the conclusion that English-language skills are an issue. Employers are more likely to report dissatisfaction with the communication skills of international students than domestic students. And a survey of international students found that some self-report as not being proficient in English, despite passing the language test needed for university admission.

Claims of soft marking have been harder to prove. A paper by UNSW academic Gigi Foster, using detailed statistics on student classes and grades from two universities, argued that marks were being evened out between classes in ways that favoured international students. But Foster's report showed that even if grades were softened, they were not soft — with an average mark of only 57 per cent for international students, and many fails.

Until recently, overall pass rates counted against soft marking being widespread. First-year international students were consistently more likely to fail a subject than domestic students. But since 2006, the pass rates of international and domestic students have trended in different directions. In 2010, for the first time, international students were more likely to pass than domestic students.

Improving pass rates are not conclusive evidence of soft marking. After previous controversies about inadequate English standards, some universities increased the minimum level of English needed for admission. It would not be surprising if this translated into large increases in pass rates. By contrast, admission requirements for domestic students have dropped as the supply of university places has increased. Their enrolment growth has been strongest among students with ATARs of 70 or below. Nevertheless, a more detailed investigation of what is driving these trends would be useful.

Admission standards are never clear-cut matters. Some students do better than their prior test results would suggest, while others do worse. This complexity counts against the government prescribing admission requirements. Universities are better placed than regulators to know the skills and attributes needed for their courses and what assistance they can offer students. And some trial and error in admission is a legitimate response to uncertainty.

While universities should continue to make the final call on admission criteria, they do have a potential conflict of interest. Their financial interest in enrolling more students can conflict with the students' interest in not wasting time and money on courses they are unlikely to pass. We lack impartial sources of information that can guide students in making these judgments. The My University website, due to go live in January, will fill some information gaps, but much more is needed to help marginal students make good decisions.

There is also a conflict of interest surrounding assessment. Students who fail may not come back, costing fee revenue. This conflict is more serious than the one affecting admission standards, as it risks putting incompetent graduates into professional jobs. The Ombudsman's report cites a nursing academic's claim that soft marking had sent at least two "unsafe" registered nurses into the labour market. The only solution to this conflict is external assessment, whether of the students while at university or conducting separate tests before graduates can start work.

The Ombudsman doubts that the current system of substantial self-regulation by universities is adequate. While deliberate malpractice is unlikely to be common, the Ombudsman's report and other evidence suggests that the lack of independent information about student prospects and performance is a problem.

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