



# English for Success: From Proficiency to Participation

Helping international students turn  
English proficiency into participation,  
belonging and outcomes





# Executive Summary

English proficiency remains a critical foundation for international student success. It helps students access education, meet entry requirements and begin their study, work and life journey in Australia.

But having appropriate English levels for entry and academic success is only part of the journey to navigating life in Australia.

Once international students arrive in Australia, a wider set of cultural, social and contextual factors also shapes how confidently they can engage academically in social and professional settings: tutorials, group work, services, placements, workplaces, friendships and everyday life.

Although the sector refers to “international education” and “international students”, many students come to Australia seeking an Australian education and the opportunity to participate in Australian classrooms, workplaces and communities. They want to build relationships, engage with local peers and contribute to the wider community, not be positioned as “the other”.

The question is not only: **do students have the English skills to enter?**

It's: are we **creating enough meaningful opportunities for students to** engage **confidently after they arrive?**

This means looking beyond proficiency alone to the factors that shape participation and outcomes: confidence, cultural context, Australian communication styles, belonging, trusted navigation and opportunities to contribute beyond economic measures.

English proficiency opens the door.

Participation determines how far students can go.



# Key Findings

## 1. Entry is not the endpoint.

### Participation is the measure of success.

English proficiency remains a critical foundation for international student success. But for international students, English is not only an entry requirement. It becomes the medium through which they access lectures, assessments, group work, friendships, services, employment conversations and everyday life in Australia.

The Advisory Board discussion showed that the next stage of success depends on how confidently students can use their English in real academic, social and professional settings. This reframes English from a gatekeeping requirement to an enabler of participation.



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## ISAB recommendations

Student success strategies should move beyond readiness to enter and include readiness to participate. This could include tutorial participation practice, guided group-work expectations, peer conversation opportunities, workplace or placement communication rehearsal, and more opportunities to use English in real-world contexts.

## 2. The hidden barrier is confidence, culture and context.

Students described situations where they had the English to understand what was being said, but not always the confidence, cultural context or familiarity to respond naturally. The gap is not necessarily language ability. It is often knowing how to read tone, humour, timing, social norms, or whether it is appropriate to challenge, interrupt or ask for clarification.



I could understand the words, but I often wasn't sure how to react or respond appropriately."

**Dayoung Yun (Diane),**  
ISAB board member

This showed up across several settings:

- **Australian English:** slang, speed of speech, informal tone, humour, confronting language, accent differences and everyday expressions.
- **Cultural references:** students who grew up outside Australia may understand the language, but not always the shared references behind a conversation, from popular culture and humour to sport, media or everyday local examples.
- **Academic participation:** Students' ability to contribute in tutorials, group work and assessments may be affected by many factors that are not directly related to English proficiency, including confidence, familiarity with academic expectations, cultural norms, classroom dynamics and knowing when or how to speak up.

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### ISAB recommendation

Pre-arrival and orientation support should include exposure to Australian communication styles, not just academic information. Student support should also address the confidence and context gap identified by students, including Australian English, cultural references, social norms and academic communication. Structured, low-risk opportunities to practise can help students build confidence to participate, ask questions, express uncertainty, communicate professionally, self-advocate and navigate Australian norms.

### 3. Belonging drives student outcomes, not just student experience.

Students repeatedly linked belonging with confidence.

When students felt connected, they were more likely to speak, practise English, ask questions, seek help, attend events, join groups and build networks. When students remained only within familiar language or cultural groups, communication felt easier, but opportunities for broader participation were reduced.

The discussion also highlighted that friendliness does not automatically become friendship. Belonging often requires repeated, structured opportunities for students to enter social, academic and community spaces with confidence.

This matters because belonging supports participation, help-seeking, persistence, wellbeing, employability and advocacy. It should be understood as part of student success infrastructure, rather than a secondary measure.

“English enabled me to build friendships, participate in student activities, take on leadership roles, and engage confidently with both local and international communities.”

**Mohamed Ishraf Mohamed Ismath,**  
*ISAB board member*

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### ISAB recommendations

The sector can support stronger outcomes by creating structured peer mixing, mentoring, volunteering opportunities, community events, cross-cultural activities and local engagement opportunities that help students practise English while building genuine connection. This can also occur before students arrive so that they have a better understanding of Australian cultural norms.

## 4. Students need trusted navigation, not more information.

Students described a crowded and sometimes confusing information environment, relying on agents, family, friends, social media, peer networks, university channels and government sources. But more information does not always create more confidence.

The Advisory Board notes highlighted concerns about agent dependency, commission structures, inconsistent information and additional charges. Students expressed a desire for more independent and trustworthy guidance.

The issue is not simply a lack of information. It is a lack of trusted navigation. It matters because students cannot participate confidently if they are unsure which information to trust or what steps to take next.



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### ISAB recommendations

There is an opportunity for credible education organisations, institutions, professional bodies and government to help students make sense of the journey with clearer, more accessible and more independent guidance. This means helping students interpret information, compare options and identify trusted next steps across study, work rights, visas, employability and post-study pathways.

## 5. Students want to contribute, not just be counted.

One of the most notable themes was students' discomfort with being viewed primarily through the lens of "international education" as an industry. Students do not see themselves only through enrolments, revenue, labour supply or migration pathways. They come to Australia to study, grow, belong and contribute.

This challenges a common sector narrative. Students want a broader story: one that recognises their cultural knowledge, multilingual capability, resilience, community participation, professional potential and global connection, as well as economic value.



International students contribute far beyond academics through research, innovation, leadership, volunteering, entrepreneurship, and community engagement while bringing valuable global perspectives.”

**Mohamed Ishraf Mohamed Ismath,**  
*ISAB board member*

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## ISAB recommendations

The sector should shift from a transactional view of international students to a contribution-based view. Sector narratives and communications should show students as contributors to Australian classrooms, workplaces and communities, not only as enrolments, customers or future labour supply.



# Strategic Implications for the Sector

## For universities

Universities can build on English entry requirements by helping students participate confidently in the academic, social and professional settings that shape success.

This includes:

- Additional support around academic communication, critical thinking and writing support
- Discipline-specific language resources
- Group work and tutorial participation preparation
- Placement and workplace communication readiness
- Australian communication and cultural adjustment support
- Belonging, peer connection and community engagement programs
- Provide clearer, more accessible and more independent guidance pre-arrival

The opportunity is to make expectations clearer, create more opportunities for students to practise participation, and recognise belonging as part of student success infrastructure..



## For employers and professional bodies

Employers and professional bodies have an opportunity to better understand both the strengths and adjustment needs of international students and graduates.

Many international students bring strong English proficiency, multilingual capability, cultural intelligence, resilience and professional ambition. However, they may still need exposure to Australian workplace norms, industry-specific language and professional communication expectations.

Clearer professional pathways, placement support, internship opportunities and profession-specific guidance can help international students contribute more confidently in Australian workplaces and professions.

## For government and sector bodies

Students need trusted navigation, not simply more information, across study, work rights, visas, employability and post-study pathways.

This is particularly important where students receive advice from multiple sources with different incentives, including agents, family, friends, social media, peer networks, institutions and government channels.

Independent, accessible and student-centred information can reduce confusion, improve confidence and support better outcomes.

There is also an opportunity to tell a broader story about international students: not only as enrolments, customers or future labour supply, but as contributors to Australian classrooms, workplaces and communities.

### About Pearson ISAB

The Pearson International Student Advisory Board (ISAB) brings together student leaders from across Australia to share insights on the international student experience and help shape conversations around education, employability and the future workforce.

Convened by Pearson, ISAB serves as a platform to amplify student voices and strengthen collaboration between students, education providers, industry and government.





## About these insights

This paper reflects qualitative insights and recommendations from members of Pearson's International Student Advisory Board and does not represent every international student's experience. It is intended to bring student perspectives into sector discussions, with each organisation determining what is relevant to its context and how it may respond. Pearson's role is to provide a platform for these voices and help bring them into relevant conversations.





# Learn more about Pearson International Student Advisory Board

[pearsonpte.com/isab](https://pearsonpte.com/isab)