

WELFARE WORK ENGLISH LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS PROJECT

PROJECT REPORT

**Report to the Professional Services Development Program,
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**From the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW)
Ian Murray, Project Manager**

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Enquiries regarding this report may be addressed to:
The Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers, PO Box 42, Flinders Lane PO, Vic 8009
Telephone 03 9654 8287, Fax 03 9654 1081, email: info@aiwcw.org.au

PROJECT REPORT

For the project to establish an appropriate English language requirement for the assessment of welfare workers for migration purposes under the Professional Services Development Program, hereafter called the

WELFARE WORK ENGLISH LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS PROJECT

Executive Summary

The Project Objective was to establish an appropriate level of English language proficiency for welfare workers seeking to migrate to Australia under the General Skilled Migration program in terms of the International Language Testing System (IELTS) test.

The Australian Institute of Welfare Workers (AIWCW) is the Assessing Authority for the recognition of welfare workers for purposes of migration, using the General Skilled Migration (GSM) program. Assessment is based upon eligibility for membership of this Institute, and two basic pathways may be used. Pathway A involves graduation from a course and campus with formal AIWCW Approval, and Pathway B involves a more basic qualification, professional experience, and attainment of professional competencies.

Up until to several years ago, applicants for international recognition were comparatively few in number, with most coming from countries that had English as the native language, and especially from the UK. More recently there has been a vast increase in enrolments by international students in private and TAFE colleges offering the relevant diploma course in welfare work, and many graduates of these courses are now applying for recognition under the GSM.

English language requirements were not seen as necessary for recognition by AIWCW until the recent great influx of applicants from non-English speaking countries. Because of complaints about inadequate English language proficiency from prospective employers, field education supervisors, and teachers in the colleges, AIWCW took steps to introduce such requirements. The present Project, funded by PSDP within DEEWR, was designed to establish an appropriate level of proficiency.

AIWCW employed an expert linguist who designed, administered, and analysed a questionnaire and interview schedule involving 43 relevant stakeholders. These included representatives of employers, course providers, international graduates and students, and industry bodies. She also conducted an extensive review of the literature and consultations with other experts.

The **results** showed a considerable variety of opinions, including many that did not relate directly to the aims of the study. The study has concluded that an overall IELTS level of 7.0 is appropriate for recognition of welfare workers for the GSM, and this agreed with anecdotal views previously expressed to AIWCW. It was recommended that each of the four separate component scores (Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing) must also reach level 7.0, but that this minimum could be attained in each component over a 12 month period. There was also some uncertainty about whether the Academic or General Training form of the IELTS should apply, resulting in a recommendation that both could be used until 1st February 2012, but thereafter only the Academic form could be used.

Many participants in the study voiced concerns over issues of equity, claiming that other welfare workers were not subject to the same English language testing, but AIWCW concluded that the Institute had an obligation to do what it could to protect community welfare work clients from the sometimes drastic and dangerous consequences resulting from inadequate English skills in workers assigned to them, even if AIWCW was unable to address problems with all such workers. It was hoped that these requirements would also lead to colleges instituting higher levels of English proficiency at enrolment.

As previously requested by DIAC, these recommendations are to be implemented by 30th September 2009, and AIWCW will conduct a review by 30th June 2011. Further research is recommended prior to this review.

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 email: info@aiwcw.org.au

Introduction

This Project is the result of a funding arrangement between the Professional Services Development Program (PSDP) within the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW), which is the national professional organisation representing welfare workers, as earlier defined in the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO Code 2512-11), now replaced by ANZSCO Code 272613.

In brief, the Project Objective is to establish an appropriate level of English language proficiency for welfare workers seeking to migrate to Australia under the General Skilled Migration programme in terms of the International Language Testing System (IELTS) test.

This report should be read in conjunction with the detailed separate report by the Consultant to the Project.

Background to the Organisation

The Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW) began in 1969 representing the interests of workers in the community welfare and social services fields who had not qualified as social workers. It has as a secondary title "*The association for community services professionals*", and it provides a sense of identity for the many workers in this field who work under alternative titles. The Institute offers a number of services to members, including professional indemnity and public liability insurance, and provides a Code of Ethics and professional development requirements for them. It has made numerous submissions to enquiries and research projects on behalf of welfare workers, and has regularly researched its membership regarding their needs and various workforce issues. It maintains a National Office in Melbourne, has branches in various states, and publishes an on-line journal jointly with Monash University.

In the early 1970s AIWCW successfully promoted the establishment of vocational education courses in this field, and it now provides formal AIWCW Approval for colleges and universities, after a rigorous assessment process, which continues via subsequent monitoring.

Role of AIWCW in the General Skilled Migration Program

AIWCW has been authorised by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) to assess applicants for recognition as suitable as a welfare worker for the purposes of migration to Australia, using the General Skilled Migration program. Initially these assessments were done jointly with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) because of overlap in roles and training, and cooperation between the two professional associations has continued in the decade or so since the devolution of assessment from the National Office of Skills Recognition (NOOSR) to the professional associations.

AIWCW uses eligibility for membership as the main basis for assessment. Eligibility under Pathway A depends upon graduation from a course and at a campus which each have AIWCW Approval (including Provisional Approval which is the only kind available for the first 6 months after a new application). Under Pathway B, applicants can use a combination of other relevant qualifications, professional experience, and evidence of competency, to satisfy eligibility requirements. Applications for recognition from overseas based persons have long been received by AIWCW. Until now, AIWCW has not had an English language requirement, but relied to some extent on the minimum of IELTS Level 5.5 used by colleges for admission.

Project Administration, Methodology and Problems Encountered

The Project was designed to primarily achieve its objective by engaging an expert linguist, Elisabeth Grove, as Project Consultant; to design and conduct a survey of relevant stakeholders; to provide a review of relevant literature; and to consult with relevant persons and organisations; leading to recommendations to AIWCW about an appropriate level and form of the IELTS test. The Project was guided by a Steering Group of five persons convened by the Project Manager, Ian Murray, who represented AIWCW. He was also responsible for nominating and initially contacting suitable organisations and individuals as participants.

The Project commenced on 13th March 2009, and was planned to finish on 12th June, but written agreement was obtained from the Programme Liaison Officer (Emma Burrell) to extend the completion date until 23rd June 2009, because of great difficulty in recruiting and arranging interviews with the participants, and because of an addition to the methodology recommended by IELTS managers, after commencement of the Project. Further details are explored in the Analysis section.

Three meetings of the Steering Group were held, including a focus group meeting that involved the participation of members in the methodology. No major disagreements or controversies emerged among group members, or with the Consultant, and apart from contact difficulties with participants, and some technical difficulties with computers, no other problems were experienced in the conduct of the Project, which was completed within budget, and with the major objective fulfilled, as outlined in this report.

The work hours allowed for the Consultant and for the Project Manager were more than fully occupied, but many of the other budgeted expenses were not incurred, since interstate travel was not required, and other travel and office expenses were less than expected.

History of the Project

International students - increased enrolments, and complaints about English language skills

This Project arose out of the need to address the recent greatly increased number of international students enrolling in the two year Diploma of Community Welfare Work at private RTO colleges, and subsequently applying for recognition by AIWCW as a welfare worker for migration purposes, but without adequate English language skills.

In 2005, there were 19 applicants for recognition from Australian colleges; in 2006, 59; in 2007, 162; and in 2008, 371. The next highest source of applicants was the UK, with only about 25 in each of those years. AIWCW has been told by college teaching staff that the great majority of the students in these colleges have been recruited or referred by overseas migration and education agents, and little attention has been paid by these to either English language proficiency or to previous interest or experience in the community services field. For several years, teachers in the Registered Training Organisation (RTO) colleges, supervisors in field education placements, and prospective employers, have all complained about the lack of sufficient English language skills in those they deal with. AIWCW therefore resolved to add an English language level to the requirements for recognition as a welfare worker for migration purposes. This is expected to result in not only work-ready applicants for recognition as migrant welfare workers, but also in colleges selecting students with greater initial English language skills.

Early remedies

After mostly informal consultations with about 15-20 informants, AIWCW determined that a general level of IELTS 7.0 was required for recognition, and this was initially announced (on the AIWCW website) as applying from 1st July 2009. Following representations from DEEWR and some industry bodies, AIWCW was persuaded to delay implementation and to canvass further opinions as to the level of English language proficiency required. It was then encouraged to apply for PSDP funding to conduct a wider ranging and more objective study, using an expert consultant.

Preliminary work, including the search for a suitable consultant, and attempts to obtain data from the similar study conducted by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) in 2008, proceeded early in 2009.

Project Results and Outcomes

Only a brief summary will be attempted here, with full details and extensive discussion contained in the accompanying Consultant's Report.

Literature Review and Consultations

The Consultant commenced planning for the Project in January 2009, and by the time funding was approved late in March she had established an acceptable methodology and formal plan for the Project. A review of the relevant literature and summary of consultations with colleagues and with IDP were conducted, and incorporated into a needs analysis.

The IELTS includes separate subtests for four language skills; Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing, and two formats can be chosen by candidates; Academic and General Training. The IELTS website lists the General Training format as focussing on basic survival skills in a broad social and educational context, and is oriented to those pursuing secondary education, work experience, or training programs. The Academic form is used by almost all other professional associations, and consultations with IELTS managers IDP suggested that for linguistically demanding areas such as community welfare, 7.5 would be considered 'acceptable', and level 7.0 'probably acceptable'. Nonetheless, this Project was designed to examine the suitability of both forms, and some experts have suggested the two forms be combined. The findings of this current study were also ambivalent on this matter.

The literature review and consultations also revealed considerable doubt about the validity of the IELTS for work related purposes, but some references praised its relevance for this, and its worldwide acceptance and quality control has outweighed some of the disadvantages.

Only the study of social work was comparable to this study as applying to a similar occupation, but considerable research had addressed English language requirements for some health professions, even though the IELTS was not used for many of these.

Survey Participants and Questionnaire Results

Forty-three participants were involved in the study, representing several broad categories; social welfare agencies as employers, teachers in welfare work courses at both TAFE and private RTOs, international graduates and students, and peak bodies within the industry. Participants were confined mainly to Victoria and NSW, for reasons explained below.

Most participants completed a brief questionnaire, and then were interviewed (mostly by telephone) by the Consultant. A range of typical tasks had been drawn up after consultation with the Steering Group, and respondents were asked to assign the minimum level of English language proficiency required for each task. A score of around IELTS level 7 resulted, for 3 of the 4 categories of participants, but with wide variability among individuals, and between some participant categories. Overall, RTO teachers selected the highest minimum levels - above 7 for all subskills (components), and for Speaking and Reading closer to 7.5; while Employers rated Speaking, Listening and Writing at 6.5, and Listening at 7. However, these average scores were distorted by some individuals selecting very high or very low scores across all tasks for each subskill. For example, one TAFE teacher in NSW selected Level 6 for all tasks, and for all subskills.

Interview Results

Results Regarding Work and Study

All participants had worked with the NESB (non-English speaking background) community, but not many had experience with IELTS, apart from the graduates and students. There was general agreement that the tasks chosen were representative of the profession, but there was considerable criticism that the focus of the study was too narrow, with some objecting to the place English language proficiency had in determining the abilities of NESB workers. On the other hand, many participants emphasised the need for adequate English expression, especially where counselling, and written work were required, and legal and ethical

considerations applied. Some participants believed serious problems in child protection resulted from poor English skills, and others mentioned that productivity in an agency suffered because colleagues had to help those with inadequate English on a regular basis.

Problems in coping with study were also evident, and difficulties in coping with written assignments often led to widespread plagiarism, but this was also said to apply to domestic students. Some claimed that if poor English led to difficulties in their studies, such students would simply fail, and there was therefore no need for separate English tests.

Results Regarding Field Education and Familiarity with IELTS

Welfare work students undertake 400 hours of field education in community agencies, and the results from these field placements were also mixed, with some participants reporting widespread problems, while others reported very few.

Relatively few participants were familiar with the IELTS, and again there was no clear trend in opinion on what level to adopt, with much variation in viewpoints. Teachers in RTOs seemed to favour a lower score, compared to their questionnaire results, but this may be because they were sympathetic to the plight of their students who had enrolled before the prospect of an imminent test of English proficiency was known about. There were few opinions also regarding which format was appropriate, but several participants much preferred the Academic form. There was considerable criticism of the test itself, and the unreliability of results over time, perhaps due to differences in distractions (such as traffic noise) from one test to another.

The Impact of Any Proposed IELTS 7.0 Requirement

Participants were asked about the impact of an IELTS of 7.0 being imposed. There were some responses strongly in favour of this, saying it should raise the level of English proficiency within courses, and lead to better overall competence in graduates. Others pointed to the acute stress on current students, and some thought it would be unfair, since students are already tested in academic ability throughout the course, and they do not pass if their English is inadequate.

Attitudes to Private Course Providers

Of more general concern to the teacher participants was the large number of students with relatively low English skills and lack of commitment to future employment in the welfare sector, as a result of the two-year course attracting 60 Skills Points. Some participants complained about the attitude of RTO management, with one suggesting they were "PR factories", but an industry representative stated there were very few complaints concerning international students.

Focus Group Results

Five members of the focus group undertook an exercise devised by the Consultant and using the DVD supplied by IDP, which exposed these participants to examples of responses to several subskills on the IELTS test. Three of the 5 nominated level 7 for Speaking and Writing; another 7.5 for Speaking and 7 for Writing; but the fifth preferred 6.5 for Speaking, at least initially. Four of these participants had a preference for the academic format.

Analysis of Results by the Consultant

While there appears to be a general preference for IELTS level 7 across all subskills as an indication of 'work-readiness' for community welfare graduates, the questionnaire is not a reliable enough instrument to serve as a basis for decisions. Several categories of participants may have had an inbuilt bias. The current students were all themselves confident and competent English speakers. There were more participants from TAFE than anticipated, and some of those from NSW were particularly critical of the need for testing, and of the IELTS itself. There were relatively few employers, many of whom accepted international students on field placements, and who might have had more positive views of English proficiency.

In general, the range of opinions expressed in both questionnaire and interview results was so variable, and from such a small and somewhat skewed sample, that any conclusions must be only tentative. Nonetheless, there seemed to be a tendency from these results to favour a level of 7.0 on the Academic form of the IELTS. This was more strongly supported by the results of the Focus Group exercise, which provided a strong basis for the resulting recommendations, and this was further supported by evidence from consultations with IDP as the IELTS managers and researchers.

Other Issues Raised by the Consultant

Among many issues other than the determination of appropriate IELTS levels for welfare workers, one of the most common was alleged unfair discrimination against those from overseas. Another issue was the need to allow flexibility to employers and to vary requirements depending upon the type and location of work, but it is not reasonable to expect the professional organisation to do this. Lower standards should not be set for international welfare workers who only work within their own ethnic or language communities, or who are willing to work in rural or remote areas.

AIWCW needs to take account of the needs of international students and graduates, and of the teachers and providers of courses, but also of the clients within the welfare industry, who have not been represented in this survey. There is a need to have ongoing investigation and a review of the standards set as a result of this study.

Because of the lingering uncertainty regarding the unreliability of the IELTS test itself, and the difficulty experienced by many candidates in obtaining a score of 7.0 at the one sitting, consideration should be given to allowing the maximum score in each subskill to count during a 12 month period.

Because of similar uncertainty regarding which form of the IELTS is suitable, either the Academic or General formats should be acceptable for a period of about 2 years, only reverting to the Academic form alone after that period has elapsed.

Recommendations by the Consultant

1. A minimum IELTS Band Score of 7 over all four subskills of Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing should be adopted by AIWCW for community welfare skills recognition.
2. AIWCW should accept minimum band levels of IELTS 7 for each subskill which have been obtained by applicants in a succession of test sessions over a 12-month period.
3. This provision should be the subject of a further study, to be funded externally
4. Both IELTS Academic and General Training versions should be accepted for AIWCW recognition until 31 December 2011, by which time the current cohort of international students will have graduated.
5. From 1 January 2012, only Academic IELTS Academic Level 7 should be accepted. However, the provision of 2 above should also continue to apply; that is, minimum levels for each subskill may be obtained in different test sessions, provided that results are gained within a period of 12 months
6. AIWCW should make representation to both DEEWR and DIAC to reassure current students and recent graduates of a reasonable timeframe for implementing the new requirements.
7. AIWCW should consider exempting from the English proficiency applicants who have been continuously employed in recognised community welfare positions in Australia for a period of two years.
8. AIWCW should investigate the perceptions of unfairness associated with the differential requirements of graduates of Australian community welfare courses. An empirical study of community worker communication skills involving both international and local graduates would provide a more inclusive and defensible basis for the Association's decisions.

9. AIWCW should review these language requirements on a regular basis to check on their adequacy and appropriateness.
10. AIWCW should ensure that as broad a range of relevant organisations as possible is included in subsequent investigations, including those in regional and rural Australia.

Recruitment and Management of Participants - Reported by the Project Manager

A list of participants and their affiliation and location is included at Appendix A. The list is arranged in the categories that were determined in planning for the Project, in order to include a greater range of stakeholders in the issue.

Main problem areas

The recruitment of appropriate participants for the Project proved extraordinarily difficult, leading to an application to PSDP to extend the completion date. Similar difficulties had been experienced by the Australian Association of Social Workers, in a comparable study in May and June 2008, but the potentially huge number of welfare organisations and workers was expected to be more than adequate to provide relevant participants.

The main problem seemed to be in finding suitable people within each targeted organisation who were appropriate to the study and who had the time and willingness to participate. Even though the interview time was limited to 30-40 minutes, the workload in the community services industry is such that not many workers or employers were ready to take time away from dealing with clients or urgent agency management issues. Although most persons initially contacted agreed about the relevance of the issue being investigated, this issue may have been assigned a low priority compared to more immediate needs.

Prior to the commencement of recruiting, various formats for letters of invitation and of confirmation were discussed with the Consultant, and these were further thoroughly discussed during Steering Group meetings. An example of such a letter is included at Appendix B. There were further refinements to these letters as a result of feedback from participants, and they did not seem to be the cause of difficulty in recruitment, which mainly seemed to occur at an earlier stage.

Recruitment of employers

There is no readily available database or listing of the range of potential stakeholders, and the best source of employers was actually the telephone directory Yellow Pages, which was used to introduce some element of randomness into recruitment. Telephone contact rarely resulted in outright refusal to consider participation, although several persons asked about payment, and they were dismissive when told that this was not budgeted for. The enquiry was often referred to another worker or department, especially the Human Resources or Personnel section, but these referrals were often not followed up, despite reminders. Even when tentative agreement to participate was reached with some agencies, there was sometimes a lack of follow up contact. The Consultant had great difficulty in making contact with people to arrange telephone interview times, despite their sometimes firm agreement to participate.

Particularly disappointing was contact with the Victorian Department of Human Services, Child Protection division. An apparently appropriate worker at a regional office was enthusiastic, and reported awareness of discussions at management level regarding the very issue being addressed by this Project, but when contacted, central management referred the request to other personnel, which resulted in other managers rejecting participation. Referral back to the earlier manager brought no result.

Recruitment of international graduates and students

Recruitment of international graduates was also difficult, since there was no access to lists of these because of privacy issues. Attempts were made to recruit recent AIWCW members, with some limited success. A

participant from a private RTO offered to invite students who were about to graduate to participate, and this was considered an appropriate alternative source of participants, but these may have some understandable bias towards a lower level of requirement.

Recruitment of teaching staff at private colleges and TAFE

Teaching staff from private RTOs were deliberately recruited from some very large colleges with either 1200 or 1700 international welfare work students, as well as some quite small colleges. Some participants had been teachers in a number of TAFE colleges as well as in RTOs. TAFE colleges in Melbourne have had increasing numbers of international welfare work students, and participants from widely spaced colleges were recruited deliberately. In NSW, the TAFE system is more hierarchically structured, and the survey instruments were sent out to colleges from headquarters, with the responses collated and summarised there. This seemed to lead to responses that were often not directly focused upon the objective of the Project, including very variable and often critical comments regarding the migration regulations, IELTS, and the survey itself. This also made the overall results more difficult to analyse.

Recruitment of university teachers

Early attempts to involve universities that taught international welfare work students indicated that these students were quite rare, but this may be because many of these universities were in provincial or rural locations which would have less appeal to international students generally. For example, the relevant campus at Monash University is located in Gippsland, not in Melbourne. As a result, despite the original emphasis placed upon this category of stakeholder by DEEWR representatives, it was not possible to recruit anyone from this category.

Time and budget constraints on interstate recruitment

Although the original budget provided for interstate travel, it was not considered worthwhile to enlarge the interstate outreach of the Project, mainly because of constraints on the time of the Consultant. The work hours for the Consultant could not reasonably be extended, beyond the limits to her time as well. The difficulty experienced in finding and interviewing participants would have been compounded if interstate contacts had been further pursued. The planned number of total participants was 40, and the 43 who participated represented a reasonable spread across the categories of stakeholders. Nonetheless, it is unfortunate that participants from Queensland and Western Australia (for example) could not be included in the time and budget available.

Recruitment conclusions

One of the main concerns expressed by DEEWR representatives regarding the original decision by AIWCW to introduce English language requirements in 2008, was that the range of stakeholders was not represented in the anecdotal reports used to decide upon the tentative IELTS level. Despite interstate limitations, and lack of responsiveness to efforts to recruit participants, the planned number of participants for this Project was achieved, and most of the stakeholder groups were well represented. Within the time and budget limitations of this survey, it is considered the recruitment of participants was appropriate.

Project Management: Interactions with Consultant and Steering Group

Consultant

Elisabeth Grove was appointed as Consultant to the Project. She has an M.A. in Applied Linguistics and several post-graduate qualifications following a BA. She has extensive consultancy experience in language teaching and assessment, and taught in this area at various universities.

Discussions began with Elisabeth Grove in January 2009 regarding her possible involvement in the Project, and several early drafts were produced and discussed with PSDP personnel, prior to a formal application for funding. By late in February, she was conducting a preliminary literary research, and refining the methodology, and by late March she had intensive discussions with personnel from IDP, which controls the

IELTS in Australia. Prior to the formal commencement of the Project, she made numerous initial enquiries, and consulted her contacts among applied linguistics colleagues,

The research by the Consultant has been conducted with diligence, thoroughness and professionalism at all times. The unexpected problems in recruiting and tracking down participants, she handled with patience and flexibility, and she was able to initiate new sources of information that were relevant to the study. As a result of her consultations with her expert colleagues, she recommended a change to the methodology, which involved using the Steering Group as participants, to assist in finding the best form of the IELTS to use. She provided good preparation and follow up to the exercise she devised for this.

Most communication with the Consultant was via email, and she used this to keep the Project personnel well informed regarding progress. She provided comprehensive progress reports in preparation for each Steering Group meeting. Her email, telephone and in-person contacts were informed, articulate and courteous. Finally, her own exhaustive report, which informs this Project Report has provided a wealth of information, opinion, and hard data, upon which to make informed decisions. She has issued AIWCW with challenges that will form the basis for prolonged ongoing discussion within the Institute.

The complications in contacting participants, the variable results from some categories, and the frequent insertion of viewpoints which did not have a direct bearing on the study, all led to greater effort and time expended by the Consultant, resulting in a considerable overflow in the work hours allotted. In contrast, due in part to lack of interstate travel, other expenses were considerably reduced.

Steering Group

The Steering Group comprised:

Ian Murray (Convenor and Project Manager), Chairperson, Membership Assessment Panel (MAP), AIWCW. MSW, previously 25 years lecturer in social welfare work, Monash University.

Jan Richardson, PhD, immediate past National Secretary, AIWCW, and member of the MAP. Taught VET and uni courses to indigenous students. Cert IV in TESOL.

Jim Ross, previously senior lecturer in sociology and community work, Monash University, experienced in social research and community services requirements

Bob Morrow, previously teacher of English language to international professionals, including doctors and engineers; experienced administration using IELTS testing

Gloria Prentice, AIWCW Assessment Project Officer, experienced welfare and community worker, and current part time teacher of English language, as well as IELTS testing.

It was recruited mainly by the Project Manager, balancing expertise in applied linguistics and experience with the IELTS test, with experience with teaching, research, and practice in social welfare work.

The Steering Group met on three occasions, for about 2.5 hours each. The content of the meetings included an overview of the project and reports on progress, with an additional report on the material supplied in April by the AASW; an extensive discussion of the methodology of the study and refinement of the questionnaire and interview schedule, and of the invitation and confirmation letters; and an exercise using the DVD supplied by IDP: *IELTS Scored Explained* (2006).

At its third meeting on 18th June, the Steering Group basically accepted the recommendations of the Consultant, with some minor variations.

The Steering Group has thanked Ms Grove for her valuable guidance and the work that she has produced so that the Project was able to fulfil its main objective.

AIWCW National Executive

The AIWCW National Executive was informed of the successful application to extend the time for completion of the Project, and provided with very brief updates on progress, up until the meeting of the National Management Committee on 21st June, 2009, which accepted the report on the Project and

endorsed the recommendations in principle, subject to further refinement of details and implementation, and confirmation by the full National Executive.

AIWCW Analysis of Consultant's Results and Recommendations

Analysis of specific aspects

The very thorough review of the research literature by the Consultant provided a good understanding of the complications involved in assessment of English language proficiency, and the uncertainties regarding many aspects, including some doubts as to whether the IELTS should be used for assessment of 'work-readiness', as opposed to suitability to study. The dearth of research on similar occupations is disappointing, as was the lack of access until just after the funding commenced, to the similar research conducted by the Australian Association of Social Workers in 2008.

Consultations with IDP and other linguistic colleagues were also influential, and these, together with the deliberations of the focus group, provided some support for the eventual conclusions in this study.

There were several aspects of the conduct of the survey that proved difficult. The problems of finding and interviewing appropriate participants have already been addressed. It was essentially a survey of opinions, and the actual proficiency in English of international workers (and students) in this field could not be addressed. Since opinions were called for, the range of responses was great, and the disparity for some participants between their opinions in interviews and their questionnaire results caused some difficulty in analysis and contributed to the uncertainty of the findings.

Some individual participants had some quite extreme views, while many raised issues not directly connected with the aims of the Project. The Consultant refuted some claims about the need to provide variations to standards depending upon type of work or location. The often used argument about competency assessment during the course being enough to filter out those with poor English also does not seem to have validity in practice - only perhaps in principle. AIWCW staff were concerned at the inadequate English expression often displayed by senior students and graduates who visited the National Office.

Equity Issues

Numerous contributions from participants, and indeed the deliberations of the Steering Group have raised concerns and objections about what appear to be equity issues. The standards of English language proficiency to be implemented by the results of this study do not apply to other categories of "welfare workers", including those who may be "recognised" by AIWCW as eligible for membership. Some of these other categories or variations are now dealt with:

- 1) *Australian born graduates*
There is no doubt that some Australian born welfare work graduates from 'Anglo' backgrounds would not meet the IELTS 7.0 level, for there is no guarantee that their deficiencies in English would necessarily lead to them failing the course, as some study participants have argued with regard to international students. There have been regular complaints from employers in the media and in formal submissions that even those from an English speaking background with university degrees have inadequate English for job performance, especially re the written aspects.
- 2) *Australian educated graduates*
While it may be valid to assess those who obtained relevant qualifications overseas in order to ensure they are proficient in English, it has been argued that the study of a recognised *Australian* qualification from a recognised *Australian* educational institution should guarantee their English language competence, and if it does not, then there are problems with the college or the way the course is taught and administered, including the way the students are selected. This may be true, but in the absence of any other way of assessing such a deficiency, an external IELTS test is probably the best way of ensuring the guarantee. Colleges will have an incentive to take into an Australian taught course only those students who already have a good command of English, and to provide

further help with English during the course, so that graduates will be likely to obtain the required IELTS level.

It is claimed that no other profession imposes tests of English proficiency upon international graduates from any of their mandatory courses conducted within Australia. Requiring this from welfare work graduates could be seen as unfairly discriminatory, and possibly subject to legal challenge. However, as DIAC has made clear, each professional association is uniquely responsible for setting standards for assessment, and several professions have imposed other kinds of restrictions that only apply to those from overseas. In any case, the mere fact that no other profession tests graduates at the end of their course of study does not itself mean this is appropriate; perhaps all of them ought to do so. Other professions often require four or more years of professional education, which can gradually lead to much more proficient English. The unique situation that applies to welfare work should be recognised regarding this issue, since only two years of education is currently required. (This difference is currently being examined by DIAC.)

3) *Those with prior attainment of Permanent Residence*

If a graduate of an AIWCW Approved course and campus applies for AIWCW membership without mentioning their recent arrival from overseas, they may be granted membership without any reference to their proficiency in English. Such an applicant might already have permanent residence status, perhaps as a spouse of another migrant, and therefore may not be seeking formal AIWCW recognition under the General Skilled Migration program. As a permanent resident, they might not even be seeking to have their skills recognised for the purposes of finding employment, since their Australian qualification would already provide that. It is therefore possible, given inadequacies in course provision and assessment, that such an international graduate will have inadequate English skills to perform as a welfare worker, and still become a member of AIWCW.

4) *Welfare work employment without formal recognition*

In addition, a person can be hired in a community services job that could fit the ANZSCO description of "welfare work", without being eligible for membership of AIWCW, since welfare work is not a registered profession subject to legislation. Someone from overseas who holds a visa enabling them to work in Australia (whether as a permanent resident or not) can be employed even as a very recent arrival with quite poor English skills. A welfare agency may find that the person's language skills and contacts with regard to a specialised community outweigh any deficiencies in English, and such a person may have no formal training in this industry. This situation might even apply to relatively recently arrived welfare work students, who are able to work part-time while on student visas.

All of these situations have led to protests about unfairness, including from the international students themselves. Although it is recognised that some of those from overseas are able to practice as a welfare worker without being subject to the English proficiency standards proposed by AIWCW, and some of those workers may have considerable difficulties with English, it would seem to be necessary to impose standards where it is possible to do so. The effect of English language deficiency on clients and on agency colleagues and management can range from very serious (even occasionally life-threatening) to merely inconvenient, but overall there is a need to have a benchmark by which agencies and clients alike can be assured that spoken and written communication will be understood. By implementing such a benchmark, AIWCW hopes to raise the expectations of welfare agencies, students and graduates of welfare courses (domestic as well as international), and of course providers, as well as migration and education agents.

Implementation date protests

Another issue of unfairness concerns the planned implementation date of 30th September 2009 for the requirement for IELTS test results to be part of recognition as a welfare worker. This date was basically set at the request of DIAC, and widespread protests about this from those not involved in the study have been referred back to DIAC. There have also been many protests by participants in the Project, as outlined by the Consultant. AIWCW has expressed regret about this deadline, and indeed, had negotiated with DIAC an extension to an earlier proposal, but essentially the Institute has recognised the right of Commonwealth Government authorities to make rules on matters relating to migration.

As for unfairness on this issue, it could also be argued that the actual circumstances and motivations of many of the international students who study welfare work constitute a form of 'unfairness' to the Australian public, as represented by DIAC and DEEWR. Australia is expecting to get skilled migrants to fill a very necessary gap in the professional workforce, with projections of continued outstanding growth in this sector. Instead, there have been many reports that a large percentage of welfare students have no interest in or intention to work in this industry, and they may be willing to accept unskilled jobs after gaining Permanent Residence, which many agree is their main motivation for studying this course. DIAC has insisted that the issue of a student visa in no way guarantees Permanent Residence status, regardless of the predictions or even assurances by education agents in touch with those overseas.

Analysis of additional recommendations

The majority of the recommendations from the Consultant have been accepted by AIWCW, with some slight changes in wording and in implementation dates. February 1st 2012 is preferred to 31st December 2011, to allow for applications to be dealt with outside the holiday period. The recommendation to make further representations to DEEWR and DIAC for a reasonable timeframe for implementation is generally supported by AIWCW, and a further extension to the deadline of 30th September 2009 is also supported, but it is not added to the formal recommendations because AIWCW has already negotiated with DIAC a more reasonable timeframe than originally proposed.

The recommendation regarding exemptions for those already working in this industry in Australia is not supported at this time, although it is recommended that this be further considered as part of a review of requirements in about 2 years. Also incorporated into this review process is a recommendation for a study involving broad representation from across Australia.

An additional recommendation has been added to the report by the Consultant, dealing in a preliminary way with exemptions based upon prior lengthy familiarity with the English language. These will be further refined during the period leading to implementation.

General Analysis

Based upon earlier anecdotal information, it was anticipated that an IELTS academic level of 7.0 would be seen as necessary. Although the results have been relatively quite variable, depending upon factors explored by the Consultant, it seems the expectations have been confirmed, and level 7.0 is the minimum required.

The Analysis of Results prepared by the Consultant is generally supported. There was considerable diversity of views among participants, and even among the Steering Group members, regarding both the details examined by the survey, and the various related issues external to the Project objective. Nonetheless, there seemed to be a tentative agreement that an overall IELTS level of 7.0 is required, and that the Academic version is preferable to General Training. The Consultant's suggestion that both versions be acceptable for a transitional period of approximately two years is also endorsed. The tentative nature of her findings are acknowledged, but the support from the Focus Group and IDP consultations for her recommendations about the major objectives seem convincing.

Conclusion

In concluding this Project Report, the Objective of the Project must be kept firmly in mind. As summarised in the funding agreement, the Project Objective is "to establish an appropriate level of English language proficiency for welfare workers seeking to migrate to Australia under the General Skilled Migration programme in terms of the International Language Testing System (IELTS) test". This objective provided quite restrictive terms of reference for the main findings of the Project, although it also should allow considerable discussion of what might be deemed "appropriate", and how this might be assessed. In the course of conducting the survey, participants, Steering Group members, and the Consultant, became engaged in issues that were outside the immediate aim of the Project, but which were very relevant to the overall situation of inadequate English language proficiency in welfare workers from overseas. Their analysis and the critical comments should be noted for discussions of the wider context of these issues.

As a result of this Project, AIWCW has become more aware of the range of viewpoints surrounding all these issues, as well as their impact upon the establishment of requirements for English language proficiency for international welfare workers. The complications attached to making additions to any requirements have become very obvious, and experience resulting from this Project will be used to guide other standard setting and policy changes within this Institute.

The basic recommendations were accepted and endorsed by the AIWCW Management Committee, via a teleconference meeting on 21st June 2009, with some refinements and word changes, as set out below.

This report will be circulated to the full National Executive of AIWCW, and a final decision on the basic IELTS level and version alternatives is anticipated by 30th June 2006.

Finally, this Project has been successful in achieving its objective, within the budget allocated, and within a reasonable time frame. AIWCW extends its warm thanks to the Consultant, the members of the Steering Group, colleagues and external consultants, and the participants in the survey; and also to the Professional Services Development Program for funding the Project.

Recommendations to AIWCW

1. An overall score of 7.0 on the IELTS is required, with no component having a score less than 7.0.
2. The score of 7.0 for each language component (Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking) may be obtained at any test session over a period of 12 months. This may apply, even if scores in some components at a particular test are less than 7.0. As soon as a score of 7.0 is obtained for all four components these satisfactory scores are valid for a period of two years thereafter.
3. Either the general or the academic form of the IELTS test be recognised until 1st February 2012 by which time currently enrolled students will have graduated. Thereafter, only results from the academic IELTS test will be recognised. Provision 2. will still apply.
4. Exemptions will apply to those who were fully educated (for at least 10 years in formal schooling) in a country with English as the main or official language, as already allowed by other relevant professions. Included among these countries are: Australia, United Kingdom, Ireland, USA, Canada, New Zealand.
5. AIWCW will review these language requirements by 30th June 2011.
6. As part of that review, an empirical study of welfare worker communication skills be considered, to include both international and domestic graduates and students, and including representation from across urban, provincial and rural centres in Australia. Also included should be equity issues raised by this study.
7. Within that review, consideration be given to exemptions applying to those who are continuously employed for at least 30 hours per week during the three years prior to application, in a community welfare work position in Australia that is recognised by the AIWCW.

Ian Murray, Project Manager
 Chairperson, Membership Assessment Panel
 Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers

WELFARE WORK ENGLISH LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS PROJECT

APPENDIX A - PARTICIPANTS

Participants were sought from an original division into seven categories, as listed below. For the analysis of the data, some of these categories have been collapsed. There were 43 participants altogether, compared to the original proposed target of 36 who were to be spread among the categories.

The conclusion and recommendations in this Report do not necessarily represent the views of all participants, some of whom do not want to be identified.

All participants were provided with anonymity with regard to their particular responses and remarks, but because some participants did not want the participation of their organisation and/or themselves mentioned in this publicly available report, the details requested have been omitted.

A. Major Employers Original target: 7 participants

Robyn Fernihough Assistant Territorial Social Programme Secretary, The Salvation Army Australia, Southern Territory (Melbourne)

Melba Marginson, Executive Director, Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition

Kate Wheller Springvale Community Aid & Advice Bureau, Melbourne

Ecumenical Migration Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne

Representatives from several other large agencies, including the Victorian Department of Human Services, were contacted and initially tentatively agreed to participate, but they eventually declined. Other major organisations employing welfare workers were also contacted, including those representing religious denominations, but all without success.

B. Smaller Agencies Original target: 3 participants

Lisa Shaw Operations Manager, Second Bite (food re-cycling to welfare agencies), Melbourne

Father Peter Kerin, Salesians of Don Bosco

Wesa Chau Northern Regional Networking Officer, Action on Disabilities within Ethnic Communities (ADEC), Melbourne

Plus an un-named colleague, from the same agency.

Western Sydney Community Forum

C. Private RTO Colleges Original target: 5 participants

Peter Jasonides CEO, Institute of Tertiary & Higher Education Australia (ITHEA), Melbourne

Six other participants represented colleges in Melbourne and Adelaide, some large and some small, and including some course leaders in community welfare work and some teachers in that course.

D. TAFE Colleges Original target: 3 participants

Deborah Rosenberg. Teacher, Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Dandenong Campus, Melbourne

Angela Daddow Head of Studies, Community Services, Victoria University; also TAFE

Northern Melbourne Institute of Technology (NMIT)

Altogether, twelve participants came from TAFE colleges in Victoria (3) and NSW (9), with the latter representing 5 different campuses, including one from rural NSW.

E. Universities with significant numbers of international students, in welfare work courses.
(Original target: 3 participants)

There were no participants in this category. Follow up contact was made with several universities in Victoria and NSW but feedback indicated there were very few international students studying in this community welfare work area.

F. International Graduates and International Students soon to graduate Original target: 10 graduate participants.

There were four recent graduates from Victoria, most of whom were AIWCW members, and including one from a rural area. There were also six soon to graduate international students from a private college.

G. Other relevant organisations and industry representatives Original target: 5 participants

Karin Rule Education Program Manager, Training and Education Support, Industry Skills Unit, Dept. of Education & Training, NSW.

Giselle Mawer External VETAB Auditor, (NSW) Vocational Education & Training Advisory Board

Bronwyn Walker Research and Policy Project Coordinator, Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC), Sydney

Margaret Clark Chief Technical Writer, Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC)

Another participant represented a different kind of relevant organisation to those listed above.

WELFARE WORK ENGLISH LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS PROJECT

APPENDIX B - SAMPLE LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS



THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF WELFARE AND COMMUNITY WORKERS INC.

THE ASSOCIATION FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Vic. Reg. No. A0036440S

ABN 28 696 828 620

AIWCW National Office
PO Box 42
FLINDERS LANE PO VIC 8009

Phone: 03 9654 8287
Fax: 03 9654 1081
email: info@aiwcw.org.au
website: www.aiwcw.org.au

English Language Proficiency for Welfare Workers - Survey

Hello,

I am wondering if you are the most appropriate person at your organisation to be invited to participate in a survey, consisting of a questionnaire and follow-up interview that will help this Institute establish standards for the English language proficiency for welfare workers. If there is someone else who might be more appropriate, could you please put me in touch with them.

The background to this study is as follows. The Commonwealth Government recognises the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW) as the assessing authority for "welfare workers" within the General Skilled Migration program. Those from overseas who have been recognised as suitable as a welfare worker in Australia typically graduate from courses and campuses that have formal Approval from AIWCW. Such courses include diplomas and degrees in community welfare work, human and community services, etc..

This study has been funded largely by the Professional Services Development Program within the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations, and is overseen by a Steering Group, the details of which are available from the undersigned. More information about AIWCW and this profession is available at www.aiwcw.org.au.

Welfare and community service workers carry out demanding professional work, either directly with individual clients or with groups and communities, including community education and development projects. In areas as diverse as counselling, early intervention, family support, pastoral care, youth work and aged care, their work places constant demands on their communicative resources. In order to perform the variety of tasks involved in these roles, community welfare workers need to communicate effectively in English. Therefore, AIWCW is soon to require adequate proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing in English for recognition as a welfare worker for the purpose of migration.

If you are willing to participate, the AIWCW consultant and independent researcher, Ms Lis Grove, will soon contact you in order to arrange a convenient time for the session. This will usually be conducted by telephone, with a questionnaire being sent earlier via email, and results being completed by her according to your verbal responses. This process should take no more than 30-40 minutes of your time. All responses and personal information will be used only for the purpose of analysis and will remain confidential. If you have any preliminary questions or concerns, you could contact me at my home office - details below. If you are willing to be involved in this study, please also let me know via the details below.

Regards, from

Ian Murray, Study Convenor,
Chairperson, Membership Assessment Panel, AIWCW.

.... April, 2009
Home Office: [omitted]