

The Persistent English Language Gap between the Direct Entry and Foundation Program University Students: Empirical Evidence from the UAE

Authors : Eda Orhun

Abstract : This paper studies the IELTS exit scores of Emirati university students before graduation and specifically compares the IELTS exit performance of the English foundation program (FP) students to direct entry (DE) students. Direct entry (DE) students are the students who were able to directly start with the undergraduate program without the need to attend English foundation program courses as they were able to prove a sufficient level of English at the university admittance. The results clearly show that the gap that existed already between these two groups of students at the start does not seem to disappear at the end of university studies, as DE students' IELTS exit scores are significantly higher compared to FP students. Further work of a regression analysis exhibits that GPA and CMATH scores do have a positive and significant effect on IELTS exit scores. In addition, while the College of Education students are found to have the lowest performance in every sub-section of the IELTS exam across colleges, students of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the College of Natural and Health Sciences seem to have the best reading skills. Another important determinant of IELTS exit scores is found to be the English level of students at inception. With these results, the study offers important policy implications regarding the public education system of the UAE and sheds light on the main roots of the problem.

Keywords : English proficiency, higher education, IELTS exit scores, English foundation program, United Arab Emirates

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