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English Language Proficiency as a Predictor of Bachelor's Degree Trajectory: Evidence from Omani Higher Education

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Abstract

English language proficiency (ELP) thresholds gate access to English-medium degree study, yet they are rarely evaluated against the outcomes of students on either side of the cut-off. Using anonymised records of 3,264 undergraduates at a public Omani university (University of Technology and Applied Sciences, UTAS), this study examined how the final Foundation English mark (GE3/FDL4) and, separately, IELTS scores relate to cumulative grade point average (CGPA) and academic probation. GE3/FDL4 correlated strongly with CGPA (r = .50, n = 3,136) and remained a strong predictor after controlling for gender and postponement (β = .46); controlling additionally for programme level, which GE3/FDL4 itself partly determines, reduced the estimate to β = .37. Outcomes improved continuously across the GE3/FDL4 range, with no discontinuity at the Bachelor's threshold of 70 in local linear models. Probation risk, however, fell steeply up to the threshold and levelled off at about 5% above it. Among students with an IELTS score on record (n = 452), IELTS predicted CGPA more modestly (r = .23), consistent with the restricted range of a selected group; where both scores were available, IELTS and GE3/FDL4 correlated at r = .44. Male students were more than three times as likely as female students to be on probation. The findings support GE3/FDL4 as a useful early indicator of academic risk and suggest that the 70 threshold is best understood as a point on a risk continuum rather than a sharp boundary of readiness.

Keywords: English language proficiency; predictive validity; cut scores; IELTS; Foundation English; English-medium instruction; academic probation; Oman
Clinical trial number: not applicable.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, Oman's higher education system has adopted English-medium instruction (EMI) across most undergraduate programmes. This shift reflects policy priorities embedded in Oman Vision 2040, which identifies human capital development, global competitiveness and economic diversification as national goals (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, 2021). In this context, English language proficiency (ELP) functions not only as a linguistic competency but as a gatekeeper to degree-level study (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012).

The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) regulates progression through explicit ELP and grade point average (GPA) thresholds set out in its Academic Regulations (AR; Decision No. 612/2022; UTAS, 2022) and its General Foundation Program (GFP) Prospectus (Version 5; UTAS, Preparatory Studies Centre, 2025). Throughout this article, "Article *n* AR" refers to the corresponding article of these regulations, and "GFP Prospectus" to this prospectus. After the GFP, students' ELP status is determined by their cumulative mark in General English 3 (GE3), the final Foundation English module, which is recorded in legacy institutional data as Foundation Level 4 (FDL4) and is referred to here as GE3/FDL4. A GE3/FDL4 mark of 50–61 meets the ELP requirement for Diploma study, 62–69 for Advanced Diploma study, and 70 or above for Bachelor's study. Students may alternatively meet these requirements with an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score: band 4.5 for Diploma and Advanced Diploma, and band 5.0 or above for Bachelor's study (GFP Prospectus, 2025; Article 6 AR). ELP is a necessary but not sufficient condition for progression, because movement from Diploma to Advanced Diploma and from Advanced Diploma to Bachelor's also requires a minimum level CGPA (LCGPA) of 2.50 and 2.75 respectively (Article 6 AR).

International research has established that ELP is a meaningful predictor of academic achievement and persistence (Barkaoui, 2025; Ihlenfeldt & Rios, 2023; Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Ruegg et al., 2024), but two gaps motivate the present study. First, most evidence comes from Anglophone universities admitting international students on standardised tests; far less is known about locally developed foundation-programme assessments in Gulf EMI systems, where the same institution sets the test, the threshold and the subsequent grading. Second, studies typically report correlations across admitted students but seldom ask whether outcomes actually differ for students just above and just below the cut

score that the test is used to enforce (but see McGehee & Isbell, 2025). A validity argument for a threshold requires the latter kind of evidence.

This study uses anonymised institutional records from UTAS (academic years 2017/2018–2025/2026) to address four research questions (RQs):

1. To what extent does GE3/FDL4 predict cumulative GPA (CGPA), and how does the estimate change depending on whether programme level, which is itself partly determined by GE3/FDL4, is controlled?
2. Do academic outcomes change at the GE3/FDL4 = 70 Bachelor's threshold when students immediately above and below it are compared?
3. Among students admitted on IELTS scores, does IELTS predict CGPA, and how does this group relate to the GE3/FDL4 population?
4. How is academic probation distributed across programme levels, gender and admission cohorts, and what can these patterns show, and not show, about the ELP thresholds?

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework: Academic Language and Proficiency Thresholds

Cummins's (1979) distinction between conversational fluency and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) remains the main theoretical rationale for linking ELP to university achievement: content learning in a second language depends on decontextualised academic language that develops over several years (Cummins, 1979; Martirosyan et al., 2015). The idea of a threshold, below which language acts as a barrier to academic progress rather than a minor influence on it, underpins the use of cut scores in admissions (Graham, 1987; Schoepp, 2018). Whether such thresholds are sharp boundaries or convenient points on a continuum is, however, an empirical question that is rarely tested directly.

ELP and Academic Achievement: Recent Evidence

The association between ELP and academic achievement is well documented across contexts (Bo et al., 2023; Curle et al., 2020; Martirosyan et al., 2015; Neumann et al., 2019; Schoepp, 2018), although meta-analytic estimates of the bivariate relationship are modest, typically in the range of a weak-to-moderate correlation (Ihlenfeldt & Rios, 2023). Recent studies have refined this picture. In a Canadian longitudinal study, Barkaoui (2025) showed that the relationship between test scores and achievement varies by test, by discipline and over time. Chakiso et al. (2025) found that a national university entrance English examination explained about a third of the variance in first-year English course achievement in Ethiopia, while self-rated proficiency added little. In South African vocational engineering programmes, low ELP was associated with reduced first-year performance (du Plooy et al., 2025). In Vietnam, IELTS sub-scores, especially speaking and reading, predicted EMI course outcomes, whereas gender did not (Vu, 2026).

Two further strands are directly relevant here. First, locally developed and curriculum-aligned tests can predict achievement at least as well as international tests: Ruegg et al. (2024) found that an in-house test predicted academic success at least as well as IELTS, and better for writing. Second, a recent multi-level meta-analysis of EMI outcomes showed that studies affected by selection bias tend to overestimate the effectiveness of EMI for content learning (H. Lee et al., 2025), and causal-inference work with a large Dutch cohort found that an effect of proficiency on degree completion was supported for university students but was weaker or absent in vocational programmes (Spit et al., 2026). Associations between proficiency and success therefore cannot be assumed to be causal, or to hold equally across programme types. Studies in EMI settings also show that proficiency operates alongside academic skills and motivation (Rose et al., 2020; Soruç et al., 2021; Yuksel et al., 2023).

Evaluating Cut Scores: Selection, Range Restriction and Threshold Comparisons

Predictive validity evidence for admission tests is vulnerable to three well-known problems. The first is range restriction: when only students above a cut score are admitted, or when analyses are run within groups defined by the score, correlations are attenuated (Sackett & Yang, 2000). McGehee and Isbell (2025), for example, found no significant correlations between test scores and first-year GPA among unconditionally admitted students, but stronger positive correlations for IELTS and TOEFL among

conditionally admitted students with lower scores. The second is conditioning on variables that lie downstream of the predictor: if a test score determines which programme a student enters, controlling for programme level removes part of the score's effect and can introduce bias (Elwert & Winship, 2014). The third is that a correlation across the whole score range does not show that a particular cut score is well placed; that question requires comparing outcomes near the threshold, for instance with local regression approaches developed for discontinuity designs (D. S. Lee & Lemieux, 2010). The present study addresses all three issues.

Academic Probation as an Indicator of Degree-Trajectory Risk

Academic probation is a recognised precursor of withdrawal and non-completion (Lindo et al., 2010) and is a practical proxy for degree-completion risk where long-run graduation data are not yet available. Under the UTAS Academic Regulations, students whose semester or level CGPA falls below 2.00 are placed on probation (Article 46 AR), must recover within a specified period (Article 47 AR), and progress through a three-level warning system (Article 48 AR). Because entry to Bachelor's study requires an LCGPA of at least 2.75 (Article 6 AR), Bachelor's students are, by design, a group already selected for academic success; probation rates compared across levels therefore partly reflect the regulations rather than the effect of ELP.

Gender and Academic Outcomes in the Gulf

Gulf higher education systems are characterised by a reverse gender gap, with female students outnumbering and often outperforming male students (Ridge, 2014). This pattern is not universal in EMI contexts (Vu, 2026), which makes it important to examine whether gender differences persist after accounting for ELP.

The UTAS Context: ELP Routes to Each Programme Level

All new UTAS students complete a GFP comprising English (GE1–GE3), Mathematics and Computing. Table 1 summarises the routes through which students meet the ELP requirement for each programme level, and Table 2 reproduces the GFP English Language Admission Criterion. Two features matter for analysis. First, most students' ELP status is recorded as a GE3/FDL4 mark, whereas IELTS scores are recorded only for the minority who submitted one, either to meet the Diploma and Advanced Diploma requirement (band 4.5) or to reach Bachelor's study after a GE3/FDL4 mark below 70 (band 5.0 or above). Second, programme level is jointly determined by ELP and by GPA-based progression, so it cannot be treated as a neutral background variable when estimating the effect of ELP.

Table 1. *ELP Routes to Each Programme Level at UTAS*

Route	ELP evidence	Programme levels for which ELP requirement is met	Additional progression requirement
A	GE3/FDL4 ≥ 70	Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Bachelor's	LCGPA ≥ 2.50 (Diploma→Advanced Diploma); LCGPA ≥ 2.75 (Advanced Diploma→Bachelor's)
B	GE3/FDL4 50–69	Diploma (50–61); Advanced Diploma (62–69)	As above; Bachelor's study requires IELTS ≥ 5.0 (Route C)
C	IELTS 4.5	Diploma, Advanced Diploma	As above
C	IELTS ≥ 5.0	Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Bachelor's	As above

Table 2. *UTAS English Language Admission Criterion (GFP Prospectus, Version 5, 2025)*

Academic level	GE3 cumulative mark	IELTS band	TOEFL iBT score
Diploma	50–61	4.5 (no component < 4)	56 (no component < 13)
Advanced Diploma	62–69	4.5 (no component < 4)	56 (no component < 13)
Bachelor's	≥ 70	≥ 5.0 (no component < 4.5)	≥ 64 (no component < 15)

Methods

Research Design

The study uses a retrospective cross-sectional design based on a single extract of institutional records taken in February 2026 and covering nine admission years. Academic outcomes are compared across students and admission cohorts; individual students are not followed over time.

Data and Sample

The extract contained 5,886 student records. After excluding 21 postgraduate (Master's) records, 5,865 undergraduate and foundation records remained, spanning admission years 2017/2018–2025/2026. The analytic sample comprised the 3,264 students enrolled at Diploma, Advanced Diploma or Bachelor's level with a recorded CGPA greater than zero. The remaining 2,601 records were excluded: 1,878 students still in the GFP and 723 Diploma-level students with no CGPA yet recorded. Nineteen students recorded as "Diploma Second Year" were grouped with Diploma students. Direct identifiers (names, national identification numbers and contact details) were removed before analysis.

Measures

Cumulative GPA (CGPA) on a 4.0 scale (Article 79 AR) was the primary outcome. *Academic probation* was taken from the institutional status field, coded 1 if the student was on probation or at any of the three warning levels and 0 otherwise. Because this status reflects both semester and level GPA and the escalation rules in Articles 46–48 AR, it does not coincide exactly with a CGPA below 2.00: of the 443 students flagged, 95 had a CGPA of 2.00 or higher, and 6 students with a CGPA below 2.00 were not flagged.

GE3/FDL4 is the final Foundation English cumulative mark (0–100). In the extract, 128 students in the analytic sample had this mark recorded as 0, which denotes the absence of a mark rather than a score; 110 of them held an IELTS score, which suggests that they had met the ELP requirement by another route. These records were treated as missing, leaving 3,136 students with a valid GE3/FDL4 mark (range 50–92). *IELTS* overall band scores were available for 452 students in the analytic sample (one record of 0 was treated as missing). Covariates were gender (female = 1), postponement history (any postponed semester = 1), programme level (Diploma = 1, Advanced Diploma = 2, Bachelor's = 3) and admission cohort. Admission type was not modelled because 98.7% of the analytic sample were admitted centrally through the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC).

Analysis

Analyses were conducted in Python 3.13 (pandas, SciPy, statsmodels). After descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations, RQ1 was addressed with ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of CGPA on GE3/FDL4. Because GE3/FDL4 partly determines programme level, two specifications were estimated: Model 1 controls for gender and postponement only and estimates the total association; Model 2 adds programme level and estimates the association within levels. Estimates within each level are also reported to show the effect of range restriction. Heteroscedasticity-consistent (HC3) standard errors were used throughout, and effect sizes are reported as standardised coefficients (β), Pearson r, Cohen's d and η^2 (Cohen, 1988).

For RQ2, CGPA and probation rates were first compared across five-point GE3/FDL4 bands and between students above and below 70, both in the full sample and among Diploma students only, who share the same programme level. A local linear model was then fitted within symmetric bandwidths of 3, 5, 8 and 10 points around 70, allowing separate slopes on each side, to test whether outcomes change discontinuously at the threshold (D. S. Lee & Lemieux, 2010); the same specification was fitted as a logistic model for probation. Because marks were mildly heaped at exactly 70 (176 students, compared with 134 at 69 and 145 at 71), the CGPA models were re-estimated after excluding marks of 69 and 70. Because crossing 70 does not change the instruction that students receive at Diploma level, this analysis tests whether 70 coincides with a natural break in outcomes rather than estimating a causal effect of the

threshold. RQ3 repeated the correlation and regression analyses for IELTS, and RQ4 used cross-tabulations, chi-square tests and logistic regression of probation on GE3/FDL4, gender and postponement, reported as odds ratios (*OR*) with 95% confidence intervals (CI).

Results

Sample Characteristics

The analytic sample comprised 3,264 students (female $n = 1{,}773$, 54.3%; male $n = 1{,}491$, 45.7%): 2,210 at Diploma level (67.7%), 652 at Advanced Diploma level (20.0%) and 402 at Bachelor's level (12.3%). Mean CGPA was 2.62 ($SD = 0.57$), and 443 students (13.6%) were on probation. Among the 3,136 students with a valid GE3/FDL4 mark, the mean was 66.1 ($SD = 7.6$), and 35.4% scored 70 or above (Table 3). All but one of the 402 Bachelor's students had met the Bachelor's ELP requirement through GE3/FDL4 ≥ 70 ($n = 251$) or an IELTS score ($n = 161$). Table 4 presents the correlations among the study variables.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for the Analytic Sample*

Variable	n	M	SD	Notes
CGPA	3,264	2.62	0.57	4.0 scale; range 0.20–4.00
GE3/FDL4 mark	3,136	66.12	7.55	Range 50–92; 35.4% ≥ 70
IELTS overall band	452	5.00	0.40	Range 4.5–7.5
Female (%)	3,264	54.3	—	Female CGPA M = 2.77; male CGPA M = 2.45
Any postponed semester (%)	3,264	7.4	—	
On probation (%)	3,264	13.6	—	Institutional probation or warning status
Programme level: Diploma / Advanced Diploma / Bachelor's	2,210 / 652 / 402	—	—	67.7% / 20.0% / 12.3%

Table 4. *Correlations Among Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CGPA	—					
2. GE3/FDL4	.50***	—				
3. IELTS	.23***	.44***	—			
4. Female	.28***	.22***	−.03	—		
5. Postponed	−.05**	−.07***	−.02	−.03	—	
6. Programme level	.44***	.30***	.28***	.14***	.09***	—

GE3/FDL4 and Cumulative GPA (RQ1)

GE3/FDL4 correlated strongly with CGPA ($r = .50$, $p < .001$, $n = 3{,}136$). In Model 1 (Table 5), GE3/FDL4 remained a strong predictor after controlling for gender and postponement ($B = 0.034$, $\beta = .46$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .28$): each additional 10 GE3/FDL4 points was associated with about one third of a grade point in CGPA. Adding programme level (Model 2) reduced the coefficient to $\beta = .37$ ($B = 0.027$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .36$). The difference indicates that part of the association between GE3/FDL4 and CGPA operates through the level a student reaches. Within single programme levels the association weakened as the GE3/FDL4 range narrowed: $\beta = .47$ among Diploma students ($n = 2{,}116$), $\beta = .14$ among Advanced Diploma students ($n = 634$) and $\beta = -.01$ ($p = .81$) among Bachelor's students ($n = 386$), almost all of whom had marks of 70 or above or had entered through IELTS.

Table 5. *OLS Regression of CGPA on GE3/FDL4 and IELTS, With and Without Programme Level*

Predictor	Model 1: GE3/FDL4	Model 2: GE3/FDL4 + level	Model 3: IELTS	Model 4: IELTS + level
ELP score	0.034 (0.001)***; β = .46	0.027 (0.001)***; β = .37	0.297 (0.067)***; β = .24	0.109 (0.055)*; β = .09
Female	0.206 (0.018)***; β = .18	0.178 (0.017)***; β = .16	0.267 (0.045)***; β = .27	0.167 (0.038)***; β = .17
Postponed	−0.009 (0.042); β = −.00	−0.086 (0.037)*; β = −.04	0.067 (0.070); β = .05	−0.038 (0.055); β = −.03
Programme level	—	0.249 (0.011)***; β = .31	—	0.325 (0.027)***; β = .53
n	3,136	3,136	452	452
R^2 (adjusted R^2)	.28 (.28)	.36 (.36)	.13 (.12)	.37 (.37)

Outcomes Around the GE3/FDL4 = 70 Threshold (RQ2)

Mean CGPA rose steadily across the GE3/FDL4 bands, from 2.00 at 50–54 to 3.03 at 80 or above (Table 6; $F(6, 3129) = 169.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$). Students at or above 70 had a higher mean CGPA than those below it (2.91 vs. 2.47; $d = 0.84$) and a lower probation rate (5.4% vs. 17.7%). The difference held among Diploma students alone (CGPA 2.81 vs. 2.32, $d = 0.94$; probation 8.5% vs. 23.0%).

These comparisons, however, contrast students across a wide score range. Students immediately on either side of the threshold differed much less: the 65–69 band had a mean CGPA of 2.71 and a probation rate of 8.0%, compared with 2.87 and 5.2% in the 70–74 band. The local linear models (Table 7) found no discontinuity in CGPA at 70 at any bandwidth: the estimated changes at the threshold were small (−0.087 to −0.005 grade points), and all confidence intervals included zero. Re-estimating the models without marks of 69 and 70 did not change this conclusion (estimates between −0.067 and 0.019; all $p > .40$). There was likewise no discontinuity in the probability of probation (all $p > .30$). The threshold therefore does not separate two qualitatively different groups of students. What changes around 70 is the shape of the risk gradient: probation fell from 45.2% at 50–54 to 14.9% at 60–64 and 8.0% at 65–69, then remained at 5.2–5.7% in every band above 70. In logistic regression, each five-point increase in GE3/FDL4 was associated with lower odds of probation ($OR = 0.59$, 95% CI [0.54, 0.64]), and the association remained after controlling for programme level ($OR = 0.66$, 95% CI [0.61, 0.72]) and among Diploma students only ($OR = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.58, 0.70]).

Table 6. *CGPA and Probation by GE3/FDL4 Band*

GE3/FDL4 band	n	M CGPA	SD	Probation (%)	Diploma students: n	Diploma students: probation (%)
50–54	199	2.00	0.60	45.2	180	50.0
55–59	474	2.27	0.51	24.3	402	27.9
60–64	663	2.50	0.49	14.9	508	18.9
65–69	690	2.71	0.47	8.0	429	11.9
70–74	669	2.87	0.47	5.2	387	7.8
75–79	332	2.95	0.47	5.7	161	9.3
≥ 80	109	3.03	0.50	5.5	49	12.2
< 70 (all)	2,026	2.47	0.55	17.7	1,519	23.0
≥ 70 (all)	1,110	2.91	0.48	5.4	597	8.5

Table 7. *Local Linear Estimates of the Change in Outcomes at GE3/FDL4 = 70*

Bandwidth (points)	n below / above	CGPA jump (grade points)	95% CI	p	Probation jump (log-odds)	p
± 3	428 / 452	−0.087	[−0.216, 0.043]	.189	0.71	.310
± 5	690 / 669	−0.059	[−0.156, 0.037]	.226	0.13	.778
± 8	1,115 / 893	−0.030	[−0.106, 0.045]	.433	0.23	.511

Bandwidth (points)	n below / above	CGPA jump (grade points)	95% CI	p	Probation jump (log-odds)	p
± 10	1,353 / 1,001	−0.005	[−0.074, 0.065]	.894	0.06	.839

IELTS and Cumulative GPA (RQ3)

IELTS scores were recorded for 452 students in the analytic sample ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.40$). Contrary to the assumption that IELTS was used only as a route to Bachelor's study, these students were spread across all levels: 109 held band 4.5, which meets the Diploma and Advanced Diploma requirement but not the Bachelor's requirement, and all 109 were enrolled at Diploma ($n = 56$) or Advanced Diploma ($n = 53$) level (Table 8). Of the 343 students with band 5.0 or above, 161 were at Bachelor's level. IELTS holders were a selected group: where a GE3/FDL4 mark was also available ($n = 342$), their median mark was 61 and only 13 had reached 70.

IELTS correlated with CGPA at $r = .23$ ($p < .001$). Mean CGPA was 2.55 for band 4.5, 2.89 for band 5.0 and 2.95 for bands 5.5 and above ($F(2, 449) = 23.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$). Controlling for gender and postponement, IELTS predicted CGPA (Model 3: $B = 0.297$, $\beta = .24$, $p < .001$); adding programme level reduced the estimate to $\beta = .09$ (Model 4, $p = .047$), again reflecting the part of the association that runs through programme level (see Table 5). Among students with both measures, IELTS and GE3/FDL4 correlated at $r = .44$ ($p < .001$), indicating substantial convergence between the two measures despite the restricted range of both in this group.

Table 8. *CGPA, Probation and Programme Level by IELTS Band*

IELTS band	n	M CGPA	SD	Probation (%)	Diploma / Advanced Diploma / Bachelor's
4.5	109	2.55	0.50	10.1	56 / 53 / 0
5.0	265	2.89	0.44	4.9	57 / 90 / 118
5.5–7.5	78	2.95	0.51	9.0	17 / 18 / 43

Academic Probation by Programme Level, Gender and Cohort (RQ4)

Probation rates differed sharply by programme level: 19.2% at Diploma level, 2.9% at Advanced Diploma level and 0.0% at Bachelor's level (Table 9). The Bachelor's figure should not be read as evidence about the ELP threshold. Entry to Bachelor's study requires an LCGPA of at least 2.75 (Article 6 AR), and the lowest CGPA among Bachelor's students was 2.35; the absence of probation at this level is a direct consequence of selection on GPA. Male students' probation rate (21.6%, 322/1,491) was more than three times that of female students (6.8%, 121/1,773; $\chi^2(1, N = 3,264) = 150.66$, $p < .001$), and the gap persisted among Diploma students (27.8% vs. 10.3%). Gender also predicted CGPA independently of GE3/FDL4 (Model 1: $\beta = .18$, $p < .001$).

Across admission cohorts (Table 10), mean CGPA declined from 2.95 (2019/2020) to 2.54 (2023/2024), and probation rose from 3.0% to 19.2%, during a period in which the number of students admitted each year rose from 200 (2019/2020) to more than 1,000 from 2022/2023 onwards. These differences cannot be attributed to changes in ELP or in student preparedness. The extract contains only students enrolled in February 2026, so earlier cohorts include only those still studying, without students who had already graduated or withdrawn; and later cohorts were observed at earlier stages of their programmes and with a larger share of Diploma students.

Table 9. *Academic Probation by Programme Level and Gender*

Group	On probation (n)	Total (n)	Rate (%)	Context
Diploma	424	2,210	19.2	Entry ELP: GE3/FDL4 50–61 or IELTS 4.5
Advanced Diploma	19	652	2.9	Entry requires LCGPA ≥ 2.50 at Diploma level

Group	On probation (n)	Total (n)	Rate (%)	Context
Bachelor's	0	402	0.0	Entry requires LCGPA ≥ 2.75; lowest CGPA in group = 2.35
Female	121	1,773	6.8	
Male	322	1,491	21.6	$\chi^2(1, N = 3,264) = 150.66, p < .001$
Total	443	3,264	13.6	

Table 10. *CGPA and Probation by Admission Cohort*

Admission year	n	M CGPA	SD	Probation (%)
2017/2018	3	2.35	0.31	0.0
2018/2019	33	2.88	0.37	0.0
2019/2020	200	2.95	0.43	3.0
2020/2021	224	2.89	0.49	3.1
2021/2022	832	2.59	0.49	11.8
2022/2023	996	2.56	0.57	16.3
2023/2024	792	2.54	0.63	19.2
2024/2025	181	2.75	0.60	9.9

Discussion

Why a Local Foundation English Mark Predicts So Strongly

The correlation between GE3/FDL4 and CGPA (r = .50) is considerably stronger than the modest bivariate associations typical of meta-analyses of admission tests (Ihlenfeldt & Rios, 2023) and of recent single-institution studies of international tests (McGehee & Isbell, 2025). Three explanations, which are not mutually exclusive, are plausible. The first is construct alignment. GE3/FDL4 is the culmination of a foundation curriculum designed to prepare students for the academic reading, writing and study demands of the same institution's programmes, so it samples the academic language that later courses require. This is consistent with evidence that curriculum-aligned in-house tests can predict achievement at least as well as international tests (Ruegg et al., 2024). The second is the absence of strong range restriction: unlike studies of admitted international students, the GE3/FDL4 data span almost the full range of marks that allow progression, from 50 to above 90, which allows the relationship to show (Sackett & Yang, 2000). The third explanation is less flattering to the language construct. GE3/FDL4 and CGPA are both institutional grades awarded within the same organisational culture, and both reflect attendance, coursework completion and study habits as well as language. Part of the association is therefore likely to reflect general academic engagement and prior attainment rather than English proficiency as such, and causal-inference work likewise shows that proficiency–success associations cannot be assumed to be causal or to hold equally across programme types (Spit et al., 2026). Without prior-attainment data such as secondary-school results, the present study cannot separate these components, and the coefficients should be read as predictive rather than causal.

The 70 Threshold: A Point on a Risk Continuum, Not a Boundary of Readiness

The threshold analysis qualifies the conclusion that the 70 threshold is "supported". Outcomes improve smoothly across the GE3/FDL4 range, and students scoring 68 or 69 are not measurably different from those scoring 70 or 71. This is what one would expect given how the threshold operates: at Diploma level, students on either side of 70 receive the same instruction, so the threshold could only produce a discontinuity if it marked a genuine change in underlying readiness. It does not. The evidence that does support 70 is of a different kind. Probation risk falls steeply through the 50s and 60s and then flattens: above 70, further increases in GE3/FDL4 bring little further reduction in risk. In this sense, 70 lies close to the point beyond which ELP stops being a major source of academic risk, which is a reasonable property for a degree-entry threshold, and similar to McGehee and Isbell's (2025) observation that students above well-placed unconditional cut scores perform similarly to one another.

Two consequences follow. First, the threshold is defensible as a policy choice, but not because students below it are categorically unprepared. Students in the 65–69 band were only modestly more likely to be on probation than those in the 70–74 band (8.0% vs. 5.2%), whereas students in the 50–54 band were almost nine times as likely (45.2%). Support resources would therefore be better targeted by the gradient than by the binary pass-or-fail status at 70. Second, the case illustrates a general methodological point: a strong correlation across the whole score range does not, on its own, validate a particular cut score. Threshold validation requires comparing students near the cut and examining the shape of the risk curve.

What Programme-Level Comparisons Can and Cannot Show

A tempting reading of the probation figures, falling from 19.2% at Diploma level to 0% at Bachelor's level, is that the ELP thresholds successfully filter out students at risk. This reading is not justified. Bachelor's students have passed through a GPA filter (LCGPA ≥ 2.75) as well as an ELP filter, and they are observed later in their studies. The gradient by level therefore mainly reflects the regulations and the passage of time, not the predictive validity of ELP. The same logic explains why GE3/FDL4 hardly predicts CGPA within the Bachelor's group: once both ELP and GPA have been used to select students, little variation remains to be explained. Programme level is thus a consequence of earlier performance, including GE3/FDL4, and controlling for it understates the total association between ELP and outcomes (Elwert & Winship, 2014). This explains the difference between Models 1 and 2. Institutional researchers working with multi-level progression systems should report both specifications and should not use the absence of failure in the most selective group as evidence that a threshold works.

The IELTS Route: Convergent Measures, Selected Students

The IELTS findings require a more cautious interpretation than the GE3/FDL4 findings, for reasons of selection rather than measurement. Where both scores exist, they correlate at $r = .44$, a level of convergence that is notable given that both are restricted in range in this group. The two instruments thus appear to capture overlapping proficiency. The weaker IELTS–CGPA relationship ($r = .23$) is better explained by who holds IELTS scores and by the scale itself. IELTS holders at UTAS are mostly students whose GE3/FDL4 mark was in the 50s or 60s and who obtained an external score to meet a requirement; 83% hold band 4.5 or 5.0, so the variance available for prediction is small. The coarse half-band scale further limits the information that the score can carry. Pooling IELTS and GE3/FDL4 scores as if they were interchangeable observations from one population would therefore confound differences between the groups of students with differences between the tests. Separating the routes is necessary not because the tests measure different things, but because the students who hold each score differ.

Gender and Cohort Patterns

The male disadvantage in probation, which persists after accounting for ELP and within the same programme level, is consistent with the reverse gender gap documented across the Gulf (Ridge, 2014) and contrasts with EMI settings where gender has no independent effect (Vu, 2026). Explanations proposed in the regional literature include differences in study engagement, competing employment opportunities and family expectations, but the present data contain no measures of these factors, and they remain hypotheses for further research. The deterioration in outcomes across recent cohorts coincides with rapid enrolment growth, but in a cross-sectional extract of currently enrolled students it is confounded with time in programme, level composition and the earlier departure of graduates and withdrawals from older cohorts; longitudinal tracking of successive cohorts would be needed before drawing conclusions about changes in preparedness.

Implications

Institutional and Policy Implications

For admissions and progression policy, the findings support retaining GE3/FDL4 as the primary ELP indicator and suggest that its value lies as much in early risk identification as in gatekeeping. A banded approach, in which students with GE3/FDL4 marks in the low 50s receive the most intensive support,

would match the observed risk gradient better than a single pass-or-fail cut. Institutions using IELTS as an alternative route should monitor IELTS-route students separately, recognising that they are a selected group with lower Foundation English attainment. Reports on the effectiveness of ELP thresholds should compare students near the cut score and should not rely on comparisons between programme levels.

Implications for Classroom Practice

The findings also have direct implications for teachers. First, the GE3/FDL4 mark is available to the institution before students begin credit-bearing courses and is a strong early indicator of difficulty. Content lecturers and academic advisors teaching first-semester Diploma courses could receive students' GE3/FDL4 bands, with the agreement of the institution, and use them to plan support from the first week rather than waiting for mid-semester results. Second, because the association between ELP and achievement is continuous, language support should not be confined to students who narrowly missed a threshold. In practice, this points to language-aware content teaching for whole classes: explicitly teaching the academic vocabulary and genres of each discipline, scaffolding reading of textbook and technical material, providing model answers and writing frames for assessed tasks, and giving formative feedback on writing before summative assessment. Third, collaboration between foundation English teachers and content lecturers, for example through linked or adjunct course designs in which English classes work with the texts and assignments of a parallel content course, would help sustain the academic language development that GE3 begins. Fourth, the gender gap suggests that teachers and advisors should pay particular attention to the engagement of male students, for instance through early attendance monitoring, structured study groups and peer mentoring. Finally, classroom-level evaluation of such practices, linked to GE3/FDL4 bands, would provide the intervention evidence that correlational studies like this one cannot.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, the design is cross-sectional: CGPA was observed at different stages of study for different students, and no student was followed over time. Second, the analyses are predictive, not causal. The data contain no measure of prior attainment, socio-economic background or motivation, all of which are likely to influence both GE3/FDL4 and CGPA, so the coefficients include the effect of these shared antecedents. Third, GE3/FDL4 and CGPA are both institutional grades, and shared grading practices may inflate their correlation. Fourth, the threshold analysis tests whether outcomes change at 70 but cannot isolate the effect of the threshold itself, because crossing 70 does not alter instruction at Diploma level and Bachelor's entry also depends on GPA; marks were also mildly heaped at exactly 70, although excluding marks of 69 and 70 did not change the result. Fifth, 128 students in the analytic sample (3.9%) had no valid GE3/FDL4 mark, and IELTS scores were available only for a selected minority, on a coarse scale with a narrow range. Sixth, probation was measured by an administrative status that does not coincide exactly with a CGPA threshold. Seventh, the extract contains only currently enrolled students: earlier cohorts exclude students who had graduated or withdrawn, and recent cohorts are observed early in their studies, which limits cohort comparisons and may bias the sample towards students who persisted. Finally, the data come from a single institution with a distinctive multi-level structure, and the absence of skill-level scores (reading, writing, listening, speaking) prevents analysis of which components of ELP matter most.

Conclusions

This study provides large-scale evidence from Omani higher education that the final Foundation English mark is a strong predictor of undergraduate CGPA and academic probation, with a stronger association than is typical for international admission tests. The Bachelor's threshold of 70 does not mark a sharp boundary between ready and unready students; it lies near the point where the steep decline in probation risk levels off, which makes it a defensible but not uniquely justified cut score. Comparisons across programme levels mainly reflect GPA-based selection and should not be used as evidence of threshold validity. IELTS and GE3/FDL4 scores converge where both are available, but IELTS holders form a selected group, and the two routes should be analysed separately. Future research should follow

successive cohorts longitudinally through to graduation, include prior-attainment and affective measures to separate language from general academic preparedness, examine skill-level scores, and evaluate classroom interventions targeted by GE3/FDL4 band.

Abbreviations

ANOVA: Analysis of variance
AR: Academic Regulations (UTAS Decision No. 612/2022)
CALP: Cognitive academic language proficiency
CGPA: Cumulative grade point average
CI: Confidence interval
ELP: English language proficiency
EMI: English-medium instruction
FDL4: Foundation Level 4 (legacy institutional data label for GE3)
GE3: General English 3 (final Foundation English module)
GFP: General Foundation Program
GPA: Grade point average
HC3: Heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors (type 3)
HEAC: Higher Education Admission Centre
IELTS: International English Language Testing System
LCGPA: Level cumulative grade point average
OLS: Ordinary least squares
OR: Odds ratio
RQ: Research question
TOEFL iBT: Test of English as a Foreign Language, internet-based test
UTAS: University of Technology and Applied Sciences

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Table Legends

Table 1. *ELP Routes to Each Programme Level at UTAS*

Sources: GFP Prospectus Version 5 (2025), English Language Admission Criterion; Article 6, UTAS Academic Regulations (Decision No. 612/2022). Equivalent TOEFL iBT scores are also accepted (Table 2).

Table 2. *UTAS English Language Admission Criterion (GFP Prospectus, Version 5, 2025)*

Source: GFP Prospectus Version 5 (2025). No TOEFL scores were recorded in the study data.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for the Analytic Sample*

Note. The analytic sample comprises students at Diploma, Advanced Diploma or Bachelor's level with a recorded CGPA. Diploma includes 19 students recorded as Diploma Second Year. Records with no valid GE3/FDL4 mark (n = 128) were treated as missing.

Table 4. *Correlations Among Study Variables*

Note. Pairwise n: 3,264 for correlations not involving GE3/FDL4 or IELTS; 3,136 for GE3/FDL4; 452 for IELTS; 342 for GE3/FDL4 with IELTS. Programme level coded Diploma = 1, Advanced Diploma = 2, Bachelor's = 3. **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 5. *OLS Regression of CGPA on GE3/FDL4 and IELTS, With and Without Programme Level*

Note. Cells show unstandardised coefficient B (HC3 standard error) and standardised coefficient β. ELP score is GE3/FDL4 in Models 1–2 and IELTS overall band in Models 3–4. Within-level estimates for GE3/FDL4 (controls as Model 1): Diploma β = .47 (n = 2,116), Advanced Diploma β = .14 (n = 634), Bachelor's β = −.01, ns (n = 386). *p < .05, ***p < .001.

Table 6. *CGPA and Probation by GE3/FDL4 Band*

Note. ANOVA across the seven bands: $F(6, 3129) = 169.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$. Above vs. below 70: $d = 0.84$ (all students), $d = 0.94$ (Diploma students). Diploma-level percentages for bands with $n < 60$ are imprecise.

Table 7. *Local Linear Estimates of the Change in Outcomes at GE3/FDL4 = 70*

Note. Models allow separate linear slopes on each side of 70; CGPA models use OLS with HC3 standard errors and probation models use logistic regression. Estimates test for a discontinuity in outcomes at the threshold, not a causal effect of the threshold. Excluding marks of 69 and 70, where marks were heaped, gave CGPA estimates of −0.067 (± 5), −0.011 (± 8) and 0.019 (± 10), all $p > .40$.

Table 8. *CGPA, Probation and Programme Level by IELTS Band*

Note. ANOVA: $F(2, 449) = 23.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. Band 4.5 meets the Diploma and Advanced Diploma requirement; band 5.0 or above meets the Bachelor's requirement (Table 2).

Table 9. *Academic Probation by Programme Level and Gender*

Note. Probation = institutional probation or warning status (Articles 46–48 AR). Because Bachelor's entry is conditional on LCGPA (Article 6 AR), the rate at that level reflects selection on GPA.

Table 10. *CGPA and Probation by Admission Cohort*

Note. Three students admitted in 2025/2026 are not shown. All cohorts were observed in February 2026, so later cohorts are observed at earlier stages of study; figures for 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 rest on small numbers.