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Stakeholder perceptions of the use of PTE Academic for the purpose of skilled migrant selection in the accounting profession in Australia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Within Australia's skilled migration policy, international tests of English for academic purposes, including IELTS and PTE A, are now widely used for various purposes extending beyond those for which the tests were originally designed, including regulating access to permanent residency, professional registration, and employment. In recent years, the English language test score criteria for skilled migration have become increasingly restrictive, particularly in the accounting profession. Evidence suggests that numerous and complex barriers exist to the integration of international accounting graduates into the Australian labor force, many of which can only be tenuously linked, at best, to English proficiency (Almeida & Fernando, 2017; Parry and Jackling, 2015). However, little attention has yet been paid to problematizing the existence of formal language test requirements within skilled migrant selection processes in Australia or elsewhere, nor to the ways in which test takers subjected to the requirements interpret scores and respond to their test experiences.

In this report, we examine the experiences of 22 international accounting graduates of an Australian university of taking PTE Academic for skilled migration purposes. Two interviews were conducted with each participant, one prior to a PTE Academic encounter and again immediately after receiving their scores. The purpose of a dual-interview approach was to explore if and how score outcomes led to shifts in perceptions, decisions and actions. A grounded theory approach was taken to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006), through which we identified six key, data-grounded, and interrelated themes that capture processes test takers engaged in as they situated the test in relation their migration intentions, generated understandings of the test and scores in relation to their own perceptions and experiences of using English, and decided on actions aimed at realising their score goals and migration intentions: 'Negotiating the study, employment, migration nexus', 'Self-evaluating English abilities', 'Evaluating the relevance of PTE Academic to real world English demands', 'Comparing tests: PTE Academic 79 versus IELTS 8', 'Taking goal-directed action: preparing for and taking PTE Academic', and 'Interpreting (and reinterpreting) scores'. Our findings show that the way the test score requirements function in this policy context undermines meaningful relationships between scores and the level of English needed to live and engage in professional employment in Australia, and that graduate perceptions of the test generated decisions and actions that hindered social and work integration in ways that subvert the broad aims of skilled migration policy, and generated validity issues relevant to language testers. We thus demonstrate that test takers, through their engagement with and perception of tests, play an important role in defining test constructs and in shaping both test and policy consequences in this high stakes immigration policy context.

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INTRODUCTION

Language tests are now widely used as instruments of immigration policies by governments in various national contexts, including Australia. The use of tests in this policy domain poses significant challenges for language testers, particularly in relation to evaluations of test consequences and validity, as there is no guarantee that stakeholders' interpretations and uses of test scores will align well with the views and intentions of test developers (McNamara & Roever, 2006; Shohamy, 2006). Existing research on the use and effects of high-stakes testing, while focused mainly on educational policy, rather than on immigration policy contexts *per se*, has consistently shown that individual stakeholders appropriate, modify, and resist score meanings and policy directions according to their own perceptions, leading to complex and sometimes conflicting test consequences and policy outcomes (for example, Menken, 2008; 2009; Shohamy et al., 2010; Van Avermaet & Pulinx, 2010).

While studies examining stakeholder perspectives on testing for immigration purposes remain scarce, evidence so far similarly suggests that the perceptions and actions of individuals, particularly migrants subjected to testing regimes, play a key role in generating score meanings and test and policy consequences (Cooke, 2009; Frost, 2017; Khan, 2013; Robertson, 2016). Robertson (2016), for example, reporting on a study investigating 20 migrant experiences of 'being temporary' in the Australian immigration policy context, argues that the requirements for transitioning from temporary to permanent status hinder "meaningful engagement with study and work" (2016, p. 64). She cites an example of a graduate from China, who had already gained professional employment as an accountant but felt forced to resign after repeated attempts to meet the English test requirements for a permanent visa, in order to dedicate more time to test preparation. Frost (2017), in a longitudinal, in-depth qualitative study of the experiences of four migrants taking English tests for skilled migration purposes, similarly showed that migrants' perceptions of the relevance of English tests to the demands they faced in their work contexts led them to respond to the score requirements in ways that transformed their employment goals, and, in direct conflict with the policy aims, disrupted their labour market integration. Her findings also raised questions about the validity of the use of IELTS and the Occupational English Test for skilled migration purposes, by highlighting scoring inconsistencies across repeat test encounters, and inconsistencies between test experiences and migrants' real-world experiences of using English in their professional domains, in terms of the task demands they faced and feedback they received from colleagues.

Although there is now some agreement in the field of language testing that the broader societal consequences of testing practices should be incorporated into test validation frameworks (Bachman

& Palmer, 2010; Kunnan, 2000, 2004, 2018; Xi, 2010), efforts to account for these remain centred on the intentions of test developers. All validation frameworks require, for example, that score meanings be defined and specified *a priori* by test developers, as a precursor to evaluations of consequence and their validity implications. This requirement, which precludes consideration of the diverse interpretations of different stakeholders and of the ways in which these diverse interpretations shape stakeholder behaviours to generate test and policy consequences, is inconsistent with evidence from numerous studies in the area of educational policy as well as from studies so far into the impact of the language testing in immigration policy contexts, discussed above.

A further obstacle to efforts to account for the wider social effects of test uses relates to how test takers are conceptualized in language testing. Within theoretical frameworks and empirical studies of validity and consequences, test takers exist primarily as theoretical abstractions rather than as real persons, deconstructed into the components of knowledge and skills that constitute test constructs. Individual attributes, perceptions, feelings or behaviours that fall outside what is defined as 'language ability' in theoretical models are considered to represent potential sources of construct irrelevant variance, and efforts are made to reduce the impact of these factors in test design (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; O'Sullivan & Green, 2011). Even as it is increasingly acknowledged that test taker perceptions represent an important source of validity evidence, these continue to be sought in relation to the intentions of test developers, for example, to examine if test takers perceive or engage with test tasks in the ways intended (Cheng & DeLuca, 2011, Sako & Ikeda, 2015).

Such assumptions, we argue, have hindered efforts in the field of language testing to explain and evaluate the role of tests as instruments of immigration policy. In locating the intentions of test developers as the locus of validation frameworks, the ways tests actually function in policy domains, especially the unanticipated roles tests play in the lives of individuals subjected to score-based judgments, remain hidden from view, thereby limiting our capacity to identify and account for the consequences and validity threats that emerge from such test uses. Test takers, like other stakeholders, generate understandings of test purpose and score meanings based on their own perceptions and experiences. Skilled migrants in Australia, many of whom are former students of Australian universities, have typically accumulated a range of experiences using English in various domains, and a range of test experiences, as score requirements feature at various transition points within the skilled migration pathway to permanent residency. As previous research demonstrates, individual perceptions and understandings of their English abilities, of the English demands they face in their lives, and of tests, are likely to shape decision-making and actions to generate diverse and unpredictable test and policy consequences.

Further studies examining how test takers understand test scores and the ways in which their perceptions of test scores and uses influence behaviour are thus central, we argue, to furthering conceptualizations of test impact and to building new theoretical paradigms for evaluations of test validity that allow for the diverse and competing interpretations of test purpose and score meanings that characterise policy domains. The current study contributes to this area of research by examining the experiences of twenty-two migrants, all graduates or final year students of accounting programs in an Australian university, as they seek to achieve the English tests score required to transition from temporary graduate or student visas to permanent residency status as skilled migrants in Australia. As set out below, for accountants in particular, English test scores that represent ‘superior’ English for skilled migration purposes (IELTS 8 and PTE Academic 79) now operate as a key mechanism regulating access to employment opportunities as well as permanent residency in an increasingly competitive job market. The current study focuses on these migrants’ experiences of PTE Academic in particular, and their perceptions of how this test compares to their experiences of other available tests. Previous research has focused mainly on IELTS, as until recently, this was the main English test accepted by the Australian government for immigration purposes, and as yet, little is known about the implications of competition between tests, in terms of test and policy consequences and other validity concerns.

In the section below, a brief overview of the role of English test scores within Australia’s skilled migration policy, particularly in relation to the accounting profession, is offered, along with a discussion of research into stakeholder perceptions of the English demands faced by graduate accountants, and of the extent to which English language testing is perceived to capture these demands. After this outline of the policy context, the current study is presented.

LANGUAGE TESTS AND SKILLED MIGRATION POLICY: THE STUDY, EMPLOYMENT, MIGRATION NEXUS IN THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION

In the context of Australia’s skilled migration policy, minimum English proficiency requirements have featured within migrant selection criteria for over two decades. Until recently, the only English tests accepted for skilled migration purposes in Australia were IELTS and the OET, a specific purpose English test for health professionals. In late 2014, however, PTE Academic was added to the list of recognised tests. At the same time, PTE also gained recognition from professional bodies responsible for conducting skill assessments for migration, including from Australia’s three main accounting bodies, the Institute of Public Accountants, the Institute of Chartered Accountants, and CPA (Certified Practising Accountants) Australia.

Accountants have represented a significant proportion of skilled migrant numbers in Australia over the past decade, due to persistent skill shortages (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA), 2014). A study-migration pathway, which was in effect from the late 1990s until 2010, had meant that international graduates of Australian universities could readily transition to permanent skilled visas upon completing their studies. This pathway was put in place as a means of attracting international students and also of addressing local skill shortages with 'ideal' migrants: former students already assimilated to cultural and linguistic norms in Australia (Hawthorne, 2010).

However, Since 2005, analyses of survey data as part of evaluations of the skilled migration program (for example, Birrell et al., 2006; Arkoudis et al., 2009) have consistently shown that former international students from non-English backgrounds transitioning to skilled migrant status in Australia experience difficulties in accessing employment opportunities commensurate with their qualifications and skill levels, despite persistent skill shortages. Evidence also suggests that international graduates from non-English speaking backgrounds remain unemployed or under-employed for prolonged periods compared to local graduates (Koleth, 2010). Some researchers have attributed these poorer than average labour market outcomes to a lack of English language proficiency on the part of international graduates transitioning to permanent skilled migrant status (Birrell, 2006), particularly in the field of accounting (Birrell & Healy, 2008). Moreover, the added appeal of accessing permanent residency prompted a surge in international enrolments in accounting, which led to further concerns of an oversupply of graduates (Birrell et al., 2006).

In response to these concerns, significant changes to skilled migration policy were introduced in 2010 and 2011, which effectively meant the dismantling of the study-migration pathway. These changes included a significant increase in the weighting associated with English test scores within selection criteria for permanent visas. In addition to the requirement to demonstrate 'competent' English as a pre-requisite for eligibility for permanent skilled visas, two higher levels of English ability were added to selection criteria: 'proficient' English and 'superior' English. Furthermore, criteria that had favoured international graduates, including an advantage associated with having completed tertiary studies in Australia, were removed from selection processes. These changes created a highly competitive environment, with access to permanent residency restricted to those with advanced qualifications, work experience and high-level English skills (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Hawthorne & To, 2014).

For accountants in particular, further changes to skilled migration policy introduced in 2015-16 have made English test scores increasingly central to the transition from temporary visas to permanent

residency. At this time, the number of permanent visas available for those with accounting qualifications was significantly reduced, by around 50%. This shift reflects an ongoing decline in labour market demand for migrant accountants in Australia (AWPA, 2014), and some migration agents claim that international accounting graduates in Australia now need to demonstrate 'superior' English or scores of PTE 79 in all four skills in order to be invited to apply for a permanent visa (see www.workvisalawyers.com.au, for example).

Questions remain, however, over the legitimacy and appropriateness of including high English test score requirements as part of skilled migrant selection criteria. Various studies have highlighted the existence of numerous and complex barriers to the integration of international graduates into the labour force, many of which can only be tenuously linked, at best, to English proficiency (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Berg, 2011; Gribble, 2014; Hawthorne, 2010; Hawthorne & To, 2014; Koleth, 2010; Robertson, Hoare & Harwood, 2011). Specifically in relation to the labour market integration of international accounting graduates in Australia, poor employment outcomes have been attributed to a lack of generic skills, which include but extend beyond communication skills to encompass attributes such as leadership and team-work skills, for example (Watty, 2007). The importance of a broad range of generic skills in the accounting professions is evident in the International Accounting Education Standards Board's (IAESB) list of essential attributes for those seeking to become professional accountants, which includes interpersonal and communication skills as one of five central skill sets (Smith, Maguire, & Han, 2016). However, as Smith, Maguire, and Han (2016) note, how both interpersonal and communication skills are understood by employers, including how the relationship with English proficiency is conceptualised, remains an open question, with various different and sometimes conflicting interpretations evident in the accounting literature (Hancock et al., 2009; Jones & Sin, 2003; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008).

Studies have also highlighted inconsistencies between graduate perceptions and employers' selection criteria, particularly in relation to the importance of generic skills (AEI, 2010; Jackling and De Lange, 2009) and the relationship between these skills and English language proficiency (Almeida & Fernando, 2017; Smith, Maguire, & Han, 2016). Smith, Maguire and Han (2016) investigated the perceptions of Chinese postgraduate accounting students concerning the attributes valued by employers and found that while students ranked communication skills as the most important attribute for gaining employment as an accounting professional, which was consistent with employer perspectives, they tended to overemphasize technical skills over interpersonal skills. The researchers also found that the importance of communication skills was underpinned by graduate perceptions

that IELTS scores were an inadequate measure of the complex set of skills needed to communicate effectively in the professional domain.

Parry and Jackling (2015) focused on the perspective of employers, rather than graduates, by examining recruitment practices of small, medium and large accounting firms. The researchers aimed to identify the role of perceptions of 'cultural fit' in shaping selection criteria and in determining the outcomes of overseas-born accounting graduates in Australia. They found that conceptualisations of 'cultural fit' were contingent on the cultural norms of particular firms as well as on the needs of their clients, noting that firms with clients in China tended to employ Chinese graduates where necessary to meet these needs. Typically, though, Parry and Jackling found that firms tended to avoid hiring graduates from non-Australian backgrounds, particularly from non-English speaking backgrounds, if the demographics of their client base did not render overseas-born accountants a good 'fit'. This reluctance to employ non-local graduates stemmed from a perception that these graduates represented an increased risk to firms, as they were considered more likely to possess poor English and communication skills than Australian graduates. The researchers also found that the Big Four¹ firms set higher minimum English test score requirements than the professional accounting bodies (IELTS 8 compared to IELTS 7) as part of a risk management strategy to mitigate the likelihood of graduate recruits failing to gain permanent residency and being unable to take up employment. Consequently, these graduates are typically "locked out" (p. 531) by the English test scores set by these firms, which serve as a proxy for migration status.

In a similar study, Almeida and Fernando (2017) investigated the perspective of employers, examining the criteria to which employers orient when making hiring decisions. They found that employers made a distinction between overall communication skills and English proficiency, the latter of which they considered less important. Moreover, the researchers similarly found that employers did not perceive IELTS scores to be relevant to assessing the communication skills they sought from potential employees, suggesting a misalignment between pre-migration criteria and employer perceptions of professional suitability in relation to 'soft skills'. According to Almeida and Fernando's findings, the 'soft skills' required by accountants to meet the complex demands of building and maintaining relationships with clients, from the perspective of employers, included interaction and face-to-face communication skills, which can be related to English proficiency, but also personal qualities, such as confidence.

¹ The four largest international accounting firms: KPMG, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Ernst & Young.

In addition, Almeida and Fernando (2017) found that employers were interested in the extent to which the personal attributes and values of potential employees 'fit' with the organisation's existing culture and values. While this was to some extent consistent with Parry and Jackling's (2015) finding, Almeida and Fernando's findings shed further light on the notion of 'fit', which they found was related to various attributes by employers, including personal grooming and sense of humour, as well as language-related attributes that were considered important indicators of an individual's ability to establish trust and rapport with clients, such as accent and a capacity for small talk. While Almeida and Fernando note the potential for criteria related to cultural fit to mask prejudices and discriminatory agendas, they emphasise that "a legitimate need for locally based qualifications and experience is difficult to discern from those that are more likely based on implicit prejudices held by the employer" (p. 899).

RATIONALE FOR THE CURRENT STUDY

Evidence thus suggests there is little precision or consistency among different employers concerning how critical interpersonal skills, including communication skills, are conceptualised in this professional domain. Moreover, as mentioned above, studies examining the employability of international accounting graduates have suggested a misalignment between the communication skills valued by employers and the notion of English proficiency they associate with English test scores, however ambiguously construed. Importantly, this lack of alignment has been found to influence the uses of test scores in different ways, with the Big Four firms using scores to mitigate recruitment risks associated with the uncertain migrant status of international graduates (Parry and Jackling, 2015), and others simply disregarding them as irrelevant to recruitment processes (Almeida and Fernando, 2017).

Much of the literature to date is centred on the perceptions of employers, with few studies investigating the perspective of international accounting graduates in relation to the communication demands of employment in the profession. Albeit scarce, available evidence suggests that these graduates may similarly perceive a lack of fit between the aspects of English communicative ability measured by standardised English tests and the communication skills they associate with gaining employment and successful integration into the workplace (Smith, Maguire and Han, 2016). As yet, however, how international accounting graduates' perceptions of the meaning and relevance of English test scores might influence their engagement with the testing process, or their decision making and actions in relation to realising their employment and migration goals, remains unknown. Furthermore, where the English test score criteria are explicitly mentioned, the focus is on the use of

IELTS scores for such purposes, with little is yet known about how test takers perceive PTE Academic, nor about how they compare PTE Academic with other available tests.

As argued earlier, evidence of the ways in which testing regimes are perceived and experienced by those subjected to them is critical to progressing understanding of the roles tests play as policy instruments, and to evaluating the appropriateness of the use of tests in particular policy contexts. Further research into how international graduates perceive and experience the English test score requirements that regulate access to both permanent residency in Australia and employment in the accounting profession is urgently needed. In light of this, the current study investigates the perceptions and experiences of international accounting graduates of Australian universities of the current score requirements for permanent skilled migration, of PTE Academic in relation to other tests, and relationships between their experiences using English in social, study and work contexts in Australia, their test perceptions, and their decisions and actions in relation to realising their test score, employment and migration goals.

Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are international accounting graduates' perceptions of their score requirements and of their experiences of PTE Academic and other available tests, in relation to their employment and migration goals in Australia?
2. How do these graduates' perceptions of their experiences of English testing for skilled migration purposes influence their decisions and actions in relation to achieving their test score goal, and their employment and migration goals?

METHODS

Participants

22 participants took part in the current study and their details are summarised in Table 1, below. While efforts were made to recruit participants from diverse L1 backgrounds, 18 out of 22 participants were from China and most participants were female (19 out of 22), which reflects the composition of international students enrolled in accounting courses in Australia. As shown in Table 1, time spent in Australia ranged from 0 to 9.5 years, and most participants had taken an English test more than once within their migration trajectories. Twelve of the 22 participants had taken PTE Academic before, and of these, seven had also previously taken IELTS, and two had previously taken TOEFL, all for skilled migration purposes. Ten participants were planning to take PTE Academic for the first time at the time they joined the study, and of these, two had not yet taken any test for skilled migration purposes, while seven had previously taken IELTS and one had previously taken TOEFL.

Table 1. Participant details

Participant	G	L1	Years in Australia	Other test experiences	PTE attempts prior to 1 st interview
P1	M	Chinese	2	TOEFL	3
P2	M	Chinese	2	IELTS	2
P3	F	Chinese	1.5	IELTS	None
P4	F	Chinese	4.5	IELTS	4
P5	F	Chinese	2	TOEFL	None
P6	F	Chinese	4	IELTS	2
P7	F	Chinese	7	IELTS	3
P8	F	Chinese	3	IELTS	1
P9	F	Chinese	2	TOEFL	1
P10	F	Chinese	2	None	None
P11	F	Hindi	1	IELTS	None
P12	F	Chinese	2	IELTS	None
P13	F	Chinese	2	None	1
P14	F	Chinese	1	IELTS	None
P15	F	Chinese	1.5	None	2
P16	F	Chinese	3	IELTS	None
P17	M	Khmer	2	IELTS	1
P18	F	Tagalog	<1	None	1
P19	F	Chinese	1	IELTS	None
P20	F	Hindi	1.5	IELTS	None
P21	F	Chinese	1.5	None	None
P22	F	Chinese	9.5	IELTS	3

Data collection procedures

All participants were asked to complete a background questionnaire (Appendix 1). Two interviews were then conducted with each of the 22 participants, one prior to a PTE Academic encounter and again immediately after receiving their scores. Interviews were one-on-one and conducted face-to-face by a research assistant, except in two cases, where the same research assistant conducted interviews over the phone. These were with P17, who was in his home country, Cambodia, for the semester break, and P18, who was living in her home country, the Philippines, and seeking permanent residency in Australia from there. All interviews were audio recorded. The purpose of a dual-interview approach was to explore if and how score outcomes led to shifts in perceptions, decisions and actions. Interview protocols were pilot tested with two participants prior to commencing data collection. Both interviews were semi-structured. In first interviews, participants were asked to talk about five main topics, listed below. Unscripted follow-up questions (examples provided in brackets, below) were used to elicit more in-depth responses.

Interview topics:

1. employment and migration goals, including why they were taking PTE Academic (what are your employment goals? what are your migration goals? why are you taking PTE Academic);
2. their experiences using English in real world contexts, especially in Australia (what experiences do you have using English? Do you encounter any communication problems? What kind? Do you think there are aspects of your English skills that you need to improve?);
3. their perceptions of their PTE Academic experiences compared to other tests, in terms of their test preparation, and how well they felt test tasks, scoring procedures and score outcomes aligned with their real world experiences of using English (how are you preparing for PTE Academic? How does what you do on the test compare with how you use English generally/with preparing for other tests? Is the test helping you improve your English? How? Why do you think you didn't get the scores you were aiming for?);
4. their perceptions of the intentions behind the policy score requirements (what do you think the purpose is for setting scores at PTE Academic 79/IELTS 8?); and
5. their perceptions of the fairness of the test requirements in this policy context and how these requirements impacted their lives (do you think it is fair to make graduates of Australian universities take another English test before they can work/gain residency? In what ways does having to take the test affect your life/how you feel?).

The first topic was intended to elicit information about how participants viewed the role of the test within their migration trajectories, and also to provide an opportunity for participants to make

comparisons with other tests. Topics 2 and 3 were aimed at examining if participants felt PTE Academic was relevant to the real world English demands they faced, if test preparation facilitated or hindered the development of relevant English skills, and also to shed light on how they understood their own score outcomes as well as their underlying perceptions of the construct (i.e. how they conceptualised a successful performance and how they went about trying to achieve such a performance). Topic 4 was also intended to provide information about construct perceptions, specifically, whether or not they felt the primary purpose was to measure English proficiency and if so, if they felt the level of English needed to live and work in Australia was reflected by the score requirements. Finally, topic 5 was intended to provide an opportunity for participants to share details of the broader effects their test experiences had on their lives.

Second interviews were more narrowly focused on eliciting participants understandings of their PTE Academic score outcomes, and on identifying any associated changes in test preparation (topics 3 and 4), or changes in employment and/or migration goals and intentions more generally (topic 1), as well as perceived test impacts (topic 5).

Data analysis

Interview data were transcribed and analysed thematically according to a grounded theory approach, using NVivo version 11 software. Qualitative interviews are a widely used means of investigating the thoughts, feelings and experiences of individuals (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). They are well suited to grounded theory methods, which focus on “what people do and the meanings they make of their actions and on the situations in which they are involved” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011). A grounded theory method has been adopted, at least partially, by a number of researchers in language testing (Fox, 2004; Fulcher, 1996; Frost, 2017; Pill, 2013; Plakans & Burke, 2013). Consistent with grounded theory methods described by Charmaz (2006), data analysis in this study involves an iterative process of three overlapping phases:

1. Initial coding: identifying and preliminary labelling of themes
2. Focused coding: identifying patterns, similarities and differences in the themes initially coded; developing final codes to describe key themes
3. Deriving theoretical categories: identifying and explaining relationships between key themes

As data were collected, rigorous comparative analysis were undertaken between previously collected data and new data by the two researchers (author 1 and 2). These two researchers worked together

in analysing interview transcripts from four participants, then divided the remaining transcripts in half and worked separately, before working together to examine each coding category across the entire dataset. Throughout this coding process data were compared with data, codes with codes, in an iterative process that aimed to ensure the best possible fit between the interpretations generated and the data. This method of analysis resulted in six key, data-grounded, and interrelated themes that capture processes test takers engaged in as they situated the test in relation their migration intentions, generated understandings of the test and scores in relation to their own perceptions and experiences of using English, and decided on actions aimed at realising their score goals and migration intentions: 'Negotiating the study, employment, migration nexus', 'Self-evaluating English abilities', 'Evaluating the relevance of PTE Academic to real world English demands', 'Comparing tests: PTE Academic 79 versus IELTS 8', 'Taking goal-directed action: preparing for and taking PTE Academic', and 'Interpreting (and reinterpreting) scores'. Each of these six themes is discussed separately in the findings section, below.

FINDINGS

Negotiating the study, employment, migration nexus

As shown below, study, employment and migration goals were closely intertwined for all participants creating a nexus in which the test requirements were situated for participants. Within this nexus, both permanent resident status and the English test requirements were perceived by participants as interrelated gatekeeping devices that constrained their ability to practice agency in pursuit of their goals.

All but four participants reported that their decision to undertake graduate accounting degrees in Australia had been specifically motivated by the goal of remaining and living permanently in the country. These participants sought achieving social and work integration as important parts of realising this goal, and felt that gaining accounting internships or even unrelated casual employment while completing their degrees would provide a means of gaining opportunities to interact regularly with English speakers and of opening up future employment opportunities. However, feelings of uncertainty associated with potentially being forced to leave the country upon the expiry of their temporary visas led to a privileging of test preparation over both study and casual work commitments, as in P16's case, below:

"I need to .. ah, use more time to .. prepare for the test, and, ah, so I scheduled my study this semester, ah, with only three course, and, ah, maybe I will .. I will use less time to do my job. And, ah, I want to .. spend more time and .. prepare for the exam" [Interview 1, turn 172].

Moreover, many decided to delay seeking internships or any sort of local work experience in order to dedicate all of their time to overcoming the English test requirement, as exemplified by comments from P6 and P14, below.

"So, you know, the most important thing is to get the PR first. So, the first step is prepare the English test first -- any one. IELTS or PTE" [P6, Interview 1, turn 12]

"After I take the PTE exam 'cause my current focus is to prepare for PTE exam." [P14, Interview 1, turn 16]

The remaining four participants specified that although their primary reason for having chosen to study in Australia was not related to an intention to migrate permanently, they had decided at or near the end of their studies they would apply for a permanent resident visa. This was because they aimed to gain professional work experience as part of their training in Australia, and as exemplified below, the general perception was that accounting jobs were inaccessible to migrants on temporary visas.

"I cannot find the .. very good job without the permanent resident" [P16, Interview 1, turn 34]

"Like that career fair hold by the uni and CPA...I think most of the job needs PR. Yeah, for the international students it's .. really, ... I try to apply for some jobs don't need PR, and I didn't get very good results" [P21, Interview 1, turn 46].

The perception that permanent resident status served as a gatekeeping mechanism for employment in Australia created an impetus for those with no intention of remaining permanently in the country to take an English test for this purpose. P9, for example, was clear in her intention to return to China, and intended to work in Australia temporarily to gain experience that would help her access work opportunities in her home country (*when I got the PR I will, ah, find another job, because, the PR is required by some companies, so after that I may return to China to have some other opportunities* [Interview 1, turn 34]). She and others who were not intending to migrate permanently (P10, P11 and P15) felt that the test requirement represented a distraction from pursuing their primary goal of gaining this extra training and experience while in Australia. As illustrated by P15's comments, below, participants felt they had insufficient time to simultaneously prepare job applications while preparing for the test, but because of its gatekeeping role they felt pressured to prioritise test preparation:

"I mean especially now for me, for my last semester, I supposed to get .. to find jobs, and .. find .. spend more time on my application, but now my priority is to pass the test. Because .. it could influence me a lot on the job" [P15, Interview 1, turn 154].

In addition to shaping participants' decision making in ways that undermined their work integration goals on the one hand, and subverted the policy intentions on the other (given that some were pursuing permanent visas to gain access to temporary employment), participants' experiences of the test requirements in this policy space highlighted an arbitrariness of score meanings, which raises questions about the existence of a link between scores and proficiency level in score-based decision making, as it might be imagined by language testers. While participants felt it was desirable to achieve the scores associated with 'superior' English - PTE 79/IELTS 8 or equivalent, as they felt this would improve their chances of gaining permanent residency, those who felt they would be unable to meet the requirements sought other means of fulfilling their primary employment and/or migration goals. P12, for example, had gained engineering qualifications in China before moving to Australia to undertake graduate studies in accounting. Although she intended to pursue a career in accounting, she was advised by a migration agent to nominate engineering as her skill area for the purpose of the permanent residency application, because the score requirement for migrants with qualifications in that area was lower (PTE 65/ IELTS 7).

The inherent contingency of the score requirements suggested by P12's experience, which undermines any relationship between test outcomes and the English demands needed to engage in skilled employment, is further illustrated by comments from P10, below:

"For accounting student if you want to immigrate, ah, for the moment, it's really better you get like, ah, four 79 .. more than 79 score, which equals to band 8 in IELTS, so this our ah goal. Our dream. But, um, if you really cannot make it and then just four 65 and then you can still get ten points for your immigration. And then you have to .. make up .. the other ten points by other ways" [Interview 1, turn 82]

As exemplified by the comments below from participants 4 and 8, below, many participants identified this arbitrariness as a source of policy unfairness, arguing that PTE Academic 79 was unnecessarily high considering that migrants with qualifications in other professions were able to gain permanent residency with lower test scores, despite there being no difference in the real world English demands they faced.

"It's too high for accounting. Like, for other major they can only get IELTS 7, so PTE 65 is enough... you don't have to have the ability that's so high for you to live in Australia, you know. Because

not every single person in Australia can achieve that and how come they're living here? And so it shouldn't be the main... I mean, 79 not good, but 65 okay” [P4, Interview 1, turn 132]

“The score is not reasonable. I think 65 is enough. Yeah, because my boyfriend's doing the Master of Electronic Engineering. They only need .. he only need 65 is fine. And only two weeks they [he] got a grant [=was granted a visa]” [P7, Interview 1, turn 126]

Despite the obstacle that the test requirement represented to the realisation of their employment and migration intentions, and notwithstanding feelings that the actual scores needed were too high, participants broadly supported the use of an English test as part of skilled migrant selection processes and felt it was legitimate for governments to use language test scores for this purpose. They identified English proficiency as central to social and work integration, and saw themselves as being responsible for adapting to local norms and expectations, as shown in the example below from P6.

“I think it's necessary. I just .. of course, I can't deny that if you don't have a good English skills, of course you can get a job... I choose to live here. Yeah, I was born in China but I decided to live here, so I have to. Yeah” (Interview 1, turn 128 & 130)

As shown under the next theme heading ‘Self-evaluating English abilities’, a perception that English test scores represented legitimate skilled migrant selection criteria was reinforced by a general perception among participants of a potential deficit in the English skills of Chinese accounting graduates, as many felt access to opportunities to develop oral communication skills in English during their studies was limited.

Self-evaluating English abilities

In general, participants seemed to experience a lack of agency in relation to their English language development. Many felt unable to access the opportunities to engage with English speakers that they perceived as central to developing confidence in their English abilities, due to the large proportion of students from China in accounting courses in Australia, as exemplified below.

“you can talk for two years without need to talk with a .. like, a .. other person from another country. Just talk Mandarin is enough... If you want to really practice English, you have to really talk with people with diverse range of background, and, and really .. really, ah, be into that situation” [P14, Interview 1, 132]

A lack of confidence, due to a lack of interactions in English, meant participants also felt unable to pursue these engagements outside their studies, and most reported having all Chinese friends and using Chinese in all regular daily communication. This led to the view that the English abilities of international accounting graduates in Australia, especially those from China, were open to question, which participants felt legitimised a role for testing in this policy context, as illustrated by P5's comment, below:

"Especially for the accounting major, ah: in class, all my teammates are Chinese people too, so we speak in Chinese. So, I think it [the English test requirements] makes sense because we didn't practise too much" (P5)

A lack of experience using English at university, due to this tendency for interactions to take place in Chinese, rather than English, was reinforced by a lack of access to work experience opportunities, due, participants felt, to their temporary status (see theme above). As a result, many participants had no sense of the work-readiness, or otherwise, of their English skills and felt unable to conduct self-evaluations. For example:

"I mean just live in Australia, because I haven't started work yet, I don't know what it will be when I'm working" [P1, Interview 1, turn 236]

"I don't have working experience in Australia, so .. I'm not sure" [P3, Interview 1, turn 163]

This also reinforced a perception that the use of a test in this policy context was appropriate, as test scores were seen to provide a source of evidence of communicative readiness for employment, as exemplified below.

"If we do not take the test, we don't know if we can communicate with the local people, then we don't know if we can get involved with the company, so I think the test is good" (P12)

Evaluating the relevance of PTE Academic to real world English demands

In addition to perceiving that the test provided a useful way for international accounting graduates to evaluate their English skills, many participants also viewed preparing for and taking PTE Academic as an effective alternative to real world interactions with English speakers, which, as already noted, they found difficult to access. As exemplified below, despite the lack of simulated interaction and

monologic nature of all oral tasks in the test, participants P5 and P10 reported perceiving real improvements in their ability to engage in English spoken interactions as a result of their test preparation.

"I think it -- it does improve, ah .. yeah, it ... it improves .. my ... well, .. it forces me to speak, to speak English every day, so .. it really make an improvement for me, ah, in part of speaking English" [P5, Interview 1, turn 168]

"Sometimes if you don't speak English, I cannot keep up what people are talking about and feel like I'm just standing there and, ah, just sleepy, and cannot really speak other word. But, after like one week or two weeks [of PTE Academic preparation], you listening to those things, and you found it's easier to talk with people" [P10, Interview 1, turn 90]

Similarly, many felt that although PTE Academic tasks did not specifically relate to English language usage in the accounting profession, the test provided a relevant measure of the knowledge and skills that underlie the communication demands of living in an English speaking country:

"Because, um, to get the .. four 79, means you have a .. you have a fluent skills in English, and I think that's a basic thing, ah, .. the basic thing you live in Australia, because you have to communicate to people. And that's a communication skill in PTE, I think ... even you are the accountant, you also have to speak English every day life" [P13, Interview 1, turn 116].

However, where participants felt they had achieved some level of integration with English speakers, which was especially the case for the few who had completed internships or already gained casual work in Australia, there was a tendency to view the test more as an imposition to the realisation of their broader goals than as necessary or useful, as also noted above in relation to the previous theme. P9, for example, noted a perceived gap between the benefits of test preparation compared to the benefits of the English interactions she engaged in during her accounting internship, specifically in relation to facilitating the development of her English communication skills, as shown below.

"I practise my speaking every day, but I think it's not very efficient. Ah, like, when I work with a local team, three Australians to do a consulting project, after two weeks I think my speaking is improved very quickly. But if I just practise with this application, it's just a very slow progress. But I still can get something from this practice to deal with the test." [Interview 1, turn 126]

Other participants with similar real world experiences of using English also noted inconsistencies between their perceptions of successful communication in work and other contexts, and the difficulties they encountered on tests (both IELTS and PTE Academic). This perception, exemplified by P4 and P16's comments, below, raises further questions about the appropriateness of the score requirements in this policy space.

"no problem in daily life, but if .. I'm gonna write a essay, or do PTE .. there's a problem"

[P4, Interview 1, turn 48]

"even if I .. I don't feel difficulty in communicate with people in their daily life, the test is the ... difficult to get the score" [P16, Interview 1, turn 64].

In the same vein, P4 and P9 questioned the appropriateness of the score requirements, on the basis of perceived mismatch between the English-related knowledge and skills they saw as relevant to their professional domain and daily lives, and the demands they faced on PTE Academic:

"The topic sometimes you're not familiar with, like biology and geology. I don't know about that stuff. I don't know what they're talking about. It doesn't mean that I'm not good at English, I just don't know what you're talking about... the words that are in PTE will not exist in accounting world" [P4, Interview 1, turn 120]

"If you .. got a job, you just can understand your colleagues and your managers and you just can express yourself .. it's reasonable level to be in a company. But I think the PTE test is much more strict. You need to know words in biology space and that sort of thing, and I think that is useless in your working daily life" [P9, Interview 1, turn 142]

Comparing tests: PTE Academic 79 versus IELTS 8

Regardless of how they viewed test relevance or the appropriateness of the score requirements and the use of English testing within migrant selection processes, there was a general perception among participants that achieving the scores associated with 20 migration points was impossible on IELTS but possible, if difficult, on PTE Academic. Not surprisingly, given the high stakes associated with achieving these scores, this was the main reason provided by all participants for choosing PTE Academic over IELTS. For some, the perception that PTE Academic was 'easier' than IELTS was based on personal experiences of both tests and comparisons of score outcomes, as was the case for P2, below:

“Although I got 6 in IELTS writing, I got 90 in PTE's writing for 2 times. That's...yes. I think for PTE's writing, if we know the technique for the test it will be much easier” [P2, Interview 1, turn 34]

At a broader level, reports of comparisons between PTE Academic and IELTS score outcomes appeared to be widely disseminated through social networks, including social media, and had been taken up in online sources of test preparation advice targeting would be skilled migrant accountants in Australia, particularly those from China, as illustrated in the two examples below from P6 and P10.

“For Chinese students, IELTS is hard for writing and speaking. But PTE, you know, writing is much easier...The agency [participant names test preparation course provider] recommended and my friend said, ‘oh, it's much easier than IELTS. Don't try IELTS again” [P6, Interview 1, turns 60 & 62]

“It's not hard for the Chinese student to get a high score in the listening and the reading, but ... it's like .. impossible to get like a band 8 in speaking or writing. So, ah, especially after I heard about one dentist, ah, who was born in America and ... when he took the IELTS test he only got two 7 in the speaking and the writing. After I heard that, I thought oh, I will never try that. Oh, and many of my friends have already ah got a good score in PTE, so ... you feel hopeful” [P10, Interview 1, turn 92]

Differences in the difficulty associated with achieving the score requirements for skilled migration across the two tests were widely attributed to the subjectivity of the human examiners scoring IELTS performances, and a perception that the computer-based scoring of PTE Academic was likely to be more objective and systematic (see examples below from participants 3 and 7):

“For IELTS it's difficult to get higher mark in speaking and writing, everyone says like that.. I think the marker for the speaking .. ah in the IELTS test, it, ah, your performance is ah .. is to some degree depends on your marker, because they will .. ah, interrupt you and maybe be very, ah, serious to you. So you will feel nervous and don't know .. and you don't know what to say” [P3, Interview 1, turn 120].

“The IELTS speaking exam is like you face to the real person, and .. it depends on him. Maybe he will think ‘I don't wanna listen to you more’ and give you really low mark, yes. It depends on him. But PTE is not, because on the computer. They're really fair.” [P7, Interview 1, turn 94]

There are many possible explanations for score differences across PTE Academic and IELTS, and participants aversion to engaging with a human scorer in a speaking test is possibly due, at least in some part, to the general lack of experience interacting in English that many participants reported. It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate the extent to which test taker perceptions are well-informed about the differences in the likelihood of achieving the score requirements across the two tests. However, as shown in under the heading ‘Taking goal-directed action: preparing for and taking PTE Academic, our findings suggest that test preparation providers are promoting such a perception, and that, in addition to influencing participants’ choice of test, such a belief among test takers was also driving particular, narrowly focused, test preparation behaviours.

Taking goal-directed action: preparing for and taking PTE Academic

As noted above, one main reason behind participants’ preference for PTE Academic over IELTS was the perception that computer-based scoring was likely to be more systematic. Related to this perception, participants felt that the characteristics of an ideal test performance on PTE Academic would remain constant over time and across repeat test encounters, whereas on IELTS they saw these as being contingent on the perceptions of individual examiners. This was associated with a perception that gaining task performance practice, through repeat test taking and repetition of sample tasks including dictation, sentence repetition, and read aloud tasks, represented the primary means of ultimately achieving the score requirements on PTE Academic. All participants reported preparing for the test in a similar way. The importance of repeat test taking as a preparation strategy was evident, as many participants reported not preparing for their first PTE Academic attempt; from their first attempts, they sought a sense of what the test involved and the level of preparation effort needed, rather than actual success, and they used these experiences to identify problem areas (in terms of test strategies rather than English proficiency) to inform subsequent preparation and refine test taking behaviours.

Besides planning to engage in repeat test taking, participants sought to identify ideal task performance characteristics and techniques for emulating these characteristics by gathering ‘expert’ information from online test preparation tutorials and from other, more experienced test takers. Information from these sources, which supported the perception that PTE Academic was easier than IELTS and led to

participants' choice to take PTE Academic for skilled migration purposes, as discussed under the previous heading, also supported perceptions that a computer-based scoring system could be exploited. Many participants believed, for example, that specific test strategies could be employed to override English language deficiencies – to effectively 'trick' the computer, as evidenced by quotes below from P2 and P20:

"All you need to do is keep talking. Because for the speaking part, they [test preparation websites, PTE tutors] told me that although contents matters but they don't matter too much and uh, grammar doesn't matter too much as well. Yes. Because they, what they most focused on is fluency and pronunciation" [P2, Interview 1, turn 58]

"I have taken some suggestions, like, when I was preparing for PTE, um, it's more like you have to fool the software. Yeah, I have been told that you have to fool the software, even if you don't remember what they said, like there is a component, repeat the sentence. And you just have to go with the sound of the words. You don't have to speak the exact word if you don't remember it. Just go with the sound. So that's how you fool the software" [P20, Interview 1, turn 78]

As noted above, while participants all seemed to orient to the test and approach test preparation in a similar way, and to be accessing the same sorts of information sources to inform their strategic approaches, the direction of score changes for repeat test takers varied. As set out below under the heading 'Interpreting (and reinterpreting) test scores', score outcomes provided evidence that participants used to evaluate and where necessary revise their existing test perceptions, and in some cases, triggered shifts in strategic approaches to achieving the score requirements.

Interpreting (and reinterpreting) test scores

As mentioned in the section above, repeat test taking represented a key strategy for achieving the score requirements on PTE Academic. In cases where scores outcomes improved, these supported existing perceptions and participants attributed improvements, and in two cases (P14 and P20), ultimate score success, to the quality of information received from experts, which they saw as having informed their successful test preparation and test taking behaviours.

As an example of a participant who improved but still did not reach the score requirements, P2's interpretation of his third PTE Academic scores are presented, below. In the first interview, P2 identified achieving the score requirements in speaking as his main challenge, on the basis of his

previous two sets of PTE Academic scores. These scores had indicated that his weakness was fluency, and in an effort to better conceptualise what was meant by 'fluency', he had sought information from test takers who had achieved success on this part of the test and had heard, as noted in the section above, that "all you need to do is keep talking". He adopted this strategy in a subsequent, third PTE Academic attempt, and achieved a dramatic improvement, scoring 90 for speaking compared to 60 and 73 on his two previous attempts. He viewed score success as a verification of his new understanding of fluency, which he characterised in the following terms:

"Some words should be .. spoken very fast, and they should be connect together, and then we need .. a pause is needed" [Interview 2, turn 42]

He attributed score success to the preparation he had engaged in, on the basis of advice he had received on the nature of fluency in the test:

"Just .. keep practising read aloud. And, when .. whenever I saw some news, or articles, I would .. um, read them silently, or .. read in .. read them aloud. Yeah, for practice" [Interview 2, turn 44]

P14 and P20, who had both taken IELTS previously, without success, achieved above the score requirements on all four skills on their first PTE Academic attempts. P20, who had had her schooling in English in her country, India, and reported using English in almost all daily interactions and in all contexts over her year and a half in Australia, had been unable to achieve the score requirement on the writing section of IELTS but achieved 86 on PTE Academic, and 90 in each of the remaining skills. P14, from China, achieved scores of 81 for listening, 80 for reading, 86 for writing and 90 for speaking, despite having had few interactions with English speakers since arriving in Australia.

As shown below, P14 did not attribute score success to actual improvements in her English ability, which she felt had not changed between test encounters. Rather, these scores served to evidence, in her mind, the information she had heard from other test takers comparing the two tests. She emphasised the interactional nature of IELTS, where the interlocuter can shift the direction of the conversation, as a source of difficulty that does not exist on PTE Academic. Her characterisation of PTE Academic speaking tasks highlights a lack of authenticity and suggests that a narrower construct may advantage test takers who have limited real world experience (and perhaps skills) in interacting in English:

“That means that I don't feel like it reflects on my overall ability, um, hm, but if I take the IELTS test, I .. the scores may not be that high. That's why many students prefer to take PTE exams ... Because, um, in PTE exams, you .. all you have to do is repeat as many as possible, but for the IELTS, you have to interact with people, but you may expect some, like, situations that out of your control... in PTE exams, especially when you are doing, like, speaking test, all you need to do is to follow the template” [Interview 2, turns 22 & 24]

While, as noted above, some participants' experiences of PTE Academic aligned well with information they had received about the test and with their associated test perceptions, several participants expressed frustration over what they understood to be scoring anomalies. P1, for example, felt unable to attribute meaning to his scores on his fourth test attempt, which were worse than previous attempts despite him feeling more prepared and more positive about the quality of his performance:

“Actually, it's getting worse. I don't know why ... the second time is the best one, but the third time and the fourth time is even worse than the second time ... Actually for the first two times, I didn't prepare at all but for third and fourth test, I prepared a lot but it get .. worse... the scores are always opposite to my feeling” [P1, interview 2, turns 14 , 28 & 32].

Several others (P3, P6, P8, P11, P21 and P22), who received lower than expected speaking score outcomes, attributed their lack of success to an issue associated with the computer-based scoring that they had previously identified as a key reason for choosing PTE Academic over IELTS. They perceived that certain types of voices were not being recognised by the computer system, which they felt had resulted in their low scores, as illustrated by the examples below:

“The pronunciation score is very low. Yeah, only 28. I think maybe the ma- the computer can't recognise my voice ... Because, ah, many girls have that problem. I ask a lot of people, ah, ah ... I ask such low ... such low score maybe it's not recognised by the machine because you are very ... not very low. The voice. And, ah .. maybe I speak a little bit fast when I read the sentence [P3, Interview 2, turns 10 & 12]

“In, ah, speaking part. I got .. really, really bad scores. It's only .. 37, I think. Oh my god, it's unbelievable. And I ask my teacher, ah, my friend, they told me that maybe it's ah some .. some problem with the system that the system cannot ah recognise my some .. girls some very well [P21, Interview 2, turn 8].

P6 had noted this issue in the first interview, in relation to previous PTE Academic attempts, shown below:

"I tried twice for PTE, and, um, that's the .. I found my speaking is another problem. You know my .. my speaking scores is very low...forty... and my tutor said, 'how did you get that?' I can't understand. She said, 'okay, read this for me' and I read that .. for her. And she said, 'I think your accent and pronunciation fluent are okay. So why? What happened?' And later she ident- .. she realised that, maybe because of your voice, .. your voice too thin and high. And maybe the computer doesn't like your voice. You should come down, and lower, and lower. So, I said, 'okay, I will try again .. with lower voice'" [P6, Interview 1, turn 88]

After her third PTE Academic attempt, P6 reported achieving the score requirements on the other three skills in the test, but had received a similarly low speaking score. As shown, this outcome triggered doubt in the information she had received from the previous tutor, and led to a decision to seek out opinions from multiple experts in order to identify the issue with her speaking performances:

"Speaking is still at the same point. About 40. So, after that, I, um, try to contact three tutors .. three PTE tutors. Now, my plan is to meet them, and I think they .. they will prepare a test for me. And after the test, I will listen to their suggestions and I will think about what .. what I am going to do next" [Interview 2, turn 6].

For P11, who identified as a competent English speaker – she had been educated in English in India and used English regularly in Australia, was taking PTE Academic for the first time after failing to achieve the score requirements on IELTS. She decided on the basis of this first experience that information suggesting success was more likely on PTE Academic was misguided and that computer-based scoring was unreliable. On this basis, she decided to abandon further PTE Academic attempts and refocus on taking IELTS:

"I mean even when I got the scores, I was like, "I don't know what this is." So, I'm going to take the test again, but I'm going to take the IELTS where I have, you know, a physical person sitting in front of me. I don't think I trust the computer ... I was very comfortable and speaking also went fine, but I'm not sure was I speaking really fast, or did I place my microphone, you know, the proper .. did it actually capture what I was saying" [Interview 2, turns 12 & 16]

As discussed below, participants test perceptions and approach to test preparation, as well as their PTE Academic test outcomes, both positive and negative, and their interpretations of scores, reveal several potential threats to validity that require further investigation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to shed light on international accounting graduates perceptions of and responses to the English test score requirements for permanent residency within Australia's skilled migration policy. We focused on their experiences of PTE Academic in particular, and sought to identify consequences that emerged as test takers negotiate test and policy obstacles to reaching their employment and migration goals. A scarcity of empirical research examining how test takers perceive and respond to English tests in high stakes immigration policy contexts, combined with an increasing awareness of the important role test takers play in shaping the validity of score uses and the consequences associated with testing practices (Cheng & DeLuca, 2011; Sato & Ikeda, 2015), provided a strong rationale for a focus on this particular stakeholder group.

Our findings showed that participants viewed permanent resident status as a key gatekeeping mechanism in regulating access to accounting employment opportunities in Australia, with many reporting having heard or observed that permanent residency was listed as a requirements in advertisements of professional accounting positions. As such, the test requirement was perceived to function simultaneously as an obstacle to the realisation of employment goals and migration goals. This is consistent with Parry and Jackling's (2015) finding that the uncertain visa status of international accounting graduates is viewed negatively by employers, who were in some cases using English test score requirements as a risk minimisation strategy, to reduce the likelihood of the graduates they recruited being unable to remain in the country. In the current study, as a consequence of this dual role played by tests, even participants who were not seeking to remain permanently in Australia perceived a need to meet the English test requirements for permanent residency, as a means of gaining access to work opportunities they wished to engage in temporarily, before returning to their home countries.

As our findings demonstrate, participants perceptions of the role of the test requirements in regulating access to employment and permanent resident status also led to the prioritisation of test preparation over activities that they perceived important for achieving social and work integration. Limited experiences of using English during their studies, due to high numbers of Chinese students in accounting courses in Australia and an associated tendency to interact mainly in Chinese, meant

participants lacked the confidence needed to pursue social interactions with English speakers outside of their studies. While employment was viewed as a way of accessing opportunities to interact with English speakers and of building social networks, many reported delaying efforts to pursue internships and/or job opportunities in accounting. This is consistent with findings reported by Robertson (2016) and Frost (2017) that migrants who felt forced to dedicate time to test preparation rather than to furthering their employment goals, which in some cases meant they resigned from their jobs or reduced working hours.

This tendency on the part of participants to prioritise test preparation over the pursuit of internships and other work experience in their profession also suggests that the test requirement for permanent residency may be playing a role in furthering the exclusion of international graduates. As shown by Parry and Jackling (2015) and Almeida and Fernando (2017), employers emphasise the importance of cultural fit in recruitment processes, which is likely to be facilitated by the exposure to workplaces offered by internships and by gaining casual or short term employment. A lack of engagement with such opportunities by participants, due to the pressure they felt to first ensure they would be able to remain permanently in Australia, is likely hindering their future employment prospects.

In terms of the English language development of accounting graduates in the current study, we found that the test requirements functioned in conflicting ways, depending on how participants perceived and responded to the English test requirements, making it impossible to characterise test impact as either positive or negative in terms consistent with current test validation frameworks (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Kunnan, 2000, 2004, 2018; Xi, 2010). On the one hand, as noted above, the test hindered engagement with internship opportunities and limited access to accounting jobs, thereby limiting opportunities for participants to immerse themselves in contexts where they would be able to use English regularly and further develop work relevant communication skills. On the other hand, those participants who felt unable to readily access oral interactions in English during their studies, felt that their preparation for PTE Academic provided valuable opportunities to practice and make improvements to their spoken English, which, despite the non-interactive nature of PTE Academic tasks, some noted led to improvements in their confidence and ability to use English in real world communication settings.

In addition to generating ambiguous test consequences, graduates' perceptions of test relevance raise questions about the validity of score uses in this policy domain. While many participants felt unable to identify the English demands they would face in employment, due to a lack of access to and experience in work contexts, those who had completed internships or already gained casual work in Australia highlighted inconsistencies between the demands they faced on PTE Academic and those they faced in real world contexts, in terms of the nature of tasks and particularly the performance

level required to achieve scores of PTE Academic 79. This is similar to findings reported by Frost (2017) in relation to both IELTS and the Occupational English Test, and therefore suggests a broader issue with score uses in this policy context that is not specific to any particular test. Frost (2017) found English language teachers and IELTS examiners felt that tasks were not relevant to the demands skilled migrants face at work or in their lives more broadly, and further perceived IELTS 8 to represent a level of English well beyond the reach of most test takers, including those who had already gained skilled employment on their temporary visas.

While it is not surprising that test tasks do not align well with specific workplace communication tasks, in accounting or other professions, given that both IELTS and PTE Academic are tests of general and academic English, respectively, we found that graduates repeat test encounters revealed inconsistencies in score outcomes between the two tests that were highly consequential in terms of their migration outcomes. Some graduates who had been unable to achieve the required scores over repeated IELTS attempts were able to achieve these scores on the first PTE Academic attempt. We also found that these experiences tended to be fed into networks of information sharing among test takers, which meant that even migrants who had not yet taken one or either tests perceived PTE Academic to be 'easier' than IELTS, which led to their decision to choose to take the former over the latter.

Perceptions of differences across the two tests also seemed to reinforce a perception that PTE Academic's automated scoring was more consistent and fair than scoring by human raters on IELTS, the latter of which participants felt was subjective and potentially exclusionary in the context of skilled migration. This perception of IELTS is consistent with the perceptions and test experiences of migrants in Frost's (2017) study, who noted score differences across repeat encounters over short time periods that they could not attribute to substantive changes in their English proficiency nor to changes in the quality of test performances. This led to a perception that achieving the score requirements for permanent residency depended, at least in part, on chance. In the current study, we identified a similar tendency on the part of migrants seeking permanent residency to engage in a behaviour of repeat test taking, but in the case of PTE Academic, this was driven by a perception that success on the test was contingent on sufficient task rehearsal. As our findings show, this perception was born out in test score outcomes in some, but not all cases.

While it should be considered a positive that the score requirements for permanent skilled migration are seen to be achievable on PTE Academic, especially for participants who had already demonstrated their abilities to use English effectively in work situations, the ways in which graduates approached the test and the successful outcomes this, in some cases, enabled, raises some questions about the validity of PTE Academic. Many participants in our study reported perceiving that test taking strategies

could be employed to override English language deficiencies – to effectively ‘trick’ the computer – thereby enabling test takers who were unable to achieve high scores on speaking and writing from human examiners, possibly due to a lack of communicative competence, would be able to achieve high PTE A scores. The extent to which this represents a test validity issue depends on whether participants succeeding on PTE Academic truly lack an ability to use English effectively for the purpose of living and working in Australia, and given the exclusion from real world interactions felt by many in this group of participants, this is difficult to ascertain.

A further potential threat to validity, which also challenged participants perception that automated scoring represented a more objective and reliable measure of test performances, emerged from participant interpretations of unexpectedly low speaking score outcomes on PTE Academic. As findings show, several participants attributed these outcomes to technical failure – a machine based problem whereby certain voice types, particularly those of female, Chinese speakers, could not be adequately detected by the computer system. This perception was reinforced by widespread anecdotal evidence and in some cases, by feedback participants received from English tutors, which they had sought as a means of identifying their language weaknesses and developing improved preparation strategies. While it was beyond the scope of the current study to evaluate the strength of these claims, test taker perceptions and experiences reveal a potential threat to test validity that demands further investigation.

In conclusion, while previous studies have highlighted the importance of face validity in shaping the way test takers respond to tasks, in terms of language-related processing and strategic behaviours (Cheng & DeLuca, 2011, Sako & Ikeda, 2015), the current study highlights the need to take a wider view of the role of test takers perceptions and actions in generating interpretations of score meanings and test consequences. Our study demonstrates that test taker perceptions and actions in response to the test requirements for skilled migration generate diverse and at times conflicting effects, transforming engagement with work in ways that variously hindered integration, thereby undermining policy intentions, and generating test taking behaviours that potential threaten the construct validity of tests. Of particular relevance to PTE Academic, perceptions of specific issues related to automated scoring inconsistencies and of a potential to ‘trick’ the computer with well-informed test strategies highlight a need to engage in assessment literacy efforts directed at the wide and seemingly influential network of test information sharing among migrant and other test takers. As we have argued throughout the report, our study supports the need for an increased and broadened focus, in validation frameworks and in empirical research, on the role of the perceptions and behaviours of test takers in generating interpretations of score meanings and test and policy consequences, especially in high stakes immigration contexts.

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APPENDIX 1: BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for participating in our study. To provide us with some background data and to save time in the interview, please complete this questionnaire.

Name: _____

1. What is currently your highest-level qualification? (Choose one.)

School-leaving qualification

From which country? _____

Bachelor degree – successfully completed undergraduate studies

From which university? _____

Higher degree – successfully completed postgraduate studies

From which university? _____

2. What is your first language? _____

3. How long have you studied English? _____ years

4. How long have you been in Australia? _____ years

5. What language did you mainly use in class for your secondary education? _____

6. Did you study English for Academic Purposes (EAP)? Yes No

If yes, (a) where (in which country, at university/pre-university)?

7. When did you or are you due to complete your accounting qualifications in Australia?

(month/year) _____

Please turn over

8. Have you taken PTE Academic before? Yes No

If yes:

How many times? _____

Please provide date (month and year) and scores for your previous PTE A attempts:

Attempt 1

Date: _____ Overall score: _____

Reading: _____ Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Writing: _____

Attempt 2

Date: _____ Overall score: _____

Reading: _____ Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Writing: _____

Attempt 3

Date: _____ Overall score: _____

Reading: _____ Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Writing: _____

Attempt 4

Date: _____ Overall score: _____

Reading: _____ Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Writing: _____

9. When do you plan to next take PTE Academic? _____

10. Have you taken other English tests for the purpose of professional registration/skilled migration? Yes No

If yes, please provide name of test, date (month and year) of test, and scores:

Attempt 1

Test: _____ Date: _____ Overall score: _____

Reading: _____ Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Writing: _____

Attempt 2

Test: _____ Date: _____ Overall score: _____

Reading: _____ Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Writing: _____

Attempt 3

Test: _____ Date: _____ Overall score: _____

Reading: _____ Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Writing: _____

Attempt 4

Test: _____ Date: _____ Overall score: _____

Reading: _____ Listening: _____ Speaking: _____ Writing: _____