

Engaging stakeholders: implementing the post-entry English language testing policy at the University of Melbourne

Ransom, Laurie
Academic Skills Unit
University of Melbourne
Melbourne, Australia
Email: lransom@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

In 2009, the University of Melbourne mandated post-entry English language testing and support for certain cohorts of commencing undergraduate students. Both native and non-native speakers with less than 7 IELTS, 30 VCE English or 35 VCE ESL are now required to take the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) and enrol in appropriate English language enrichment programs depending on their DELA results.

As the central university provider of academic language services, the Academic Skills Unit (ASU) has played a pivotal role in the implementation of this new policy, the success of which has been dependent on stakeholder engagement. This paper will describe the various strategies employed by the ASU to engage stakeholders – in particular, faculties – in communicating the benefits of DELA, in creating targeted language programs, and in refining practices to encourage compliance with both the test and the language support.

In the two years since implementation of the DELA policy, there has been a university-wide increase in awareness of the critical role language plays in academic and social engagement, and a more coordinated approach to early identification and provision of language enrichment programs. This presentation aims to provide some strategies for working with stakeholders to maximise student participation in post-entry testing and targeted language programs.

Keywords

Language testing, language support, stakeholder engagement

Introduction

The critical role of English language in tertiary study has become a common topic in higher education circles. In addition to anecdotal evidence, studies are showing that many students enter university with the minimum language proficiency but fail to improve over the course of their degree (Birrell, 2006; O’Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). Students themselves have indicated their belief that they are at a disadvantage because of inadequate language skills (Ransom, Larcombe & Baik, 2005). As language providers, many of us lament the low participation rates in language enrichment programs, particularly when we know that our non-native English speaking (NNES) students would benefit from early identification and intervention.

It was this very landscape in which the University of Melbourne (UoM) decided to mandate both language testing and language support in 2009. Implementing such an ambitious policy, arguably the first in Australia, required a whole of university approach and involved both internal and external stakeholders. As the central university provider for academic literacy programs, the Academic Skills Unit (ASU) played a critical role in the implementation. This paper will describe the specific context which led the UoM to make such a pivotal decision – described as ‘sector leading’ in a recent AQUA audit (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2010, p. 39) – and identify the various strategies employed by the ASU to engage stakeholders – in particular faculties - in both the implementation of the policy and the development of language programs. Finally it will discuss briefly the outcomes of the policy – both its successes and challenges. The experiences at the UoM will undoubtedly provide other institutions with an insight into some successful approaches to implementing a university-wide language testing policy.

Background

Although many students enter the University of Melbourne with the requisite language skills – a minimum of 25 VCE standard English, 30 VCE ESL and 6.5 IELTS – evidence began to accumulate to suggest that their command of academic English may in some cases be insufficient, and that this may impact both on the quality of their study experience and also on their academic outcome. To differentiate by language background or fee status was irrelevant because students from all cohorts were presenting with issues related to marginal academic English skills.

For local students, both native (ESB) and NNES, despite their disproportionate year 12 success, many struggle with the high level of academic literacy required by our courses. Screening tests administered to first semester undergraduate Law students identified almost 50% of students referred to English language development and academic support as domestic (Larcombe & Malkin, 2008). Screening tests in three other faculties mirrored these results. Furthermore, local students comprise approximately 50% of the ASU's individual tutorial service, which suggests domestic students do seek assistance with academic language development.

Not surprising, however, is that both domestic and overseas students from non-English speaking backgrounds may be more disadvantaged because of language competence. Longitudinal data showed that the average performance of students entering through the VCE ESL pathway at the UoM was approximately 5% below that of students entering via the VCE standard English pathway. Unacceptably, this difference persisted into the third year of Bachelor level study (*Application of the proposed framework*, 2007). International students at the UoM also reported in their final year survey that lack of English impacts not only on academic progression, but also on their ability to interact socially: "A lack of fluency in English not only affected students' understanding of academic content, but also has spin-off effects into other areas of their lives" (*Survey of final year international students*, 2005, p. 5).

In recognition of the impact of language on study experience and academic outcome, the UoM mandated post-entry language testing and support for commencing undergraduate students, both domestic and international in 2009. Students who may otherwise meet entry requirements but fall below certain language thresholds – less than 30 VCE standard English, 35 VCE ESL English and 7 IELTS – are targeted to take DELA. Those whose DELA results fall below 3.4 (out of 6) are required to enroll in a faculty-determined language enrichment program. In line with the University's diversity policy, which does not discriminate on the basis of fee status or language background, this new language testing policy enabled the University "to address known difficulties with some entry pathways, without closing off access to otherwise adequately prepared equity groups and to overseas students" (*Application of the proposed framework*, 2007, p. 2).

Language testing

The University of Melbourne has a long history of post-entry language testing, albeit voluntary. It introduced the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) in 1999 as a means of identifying early international students potentially at risk because of language ability and referring them to appropriate support. This initiative was further strengthened in 2002 by the Working Group on Diagnostic Testing and English Language Support Programs. It recommended, and Academic Board concurred, that all students linguistically at risk should be identified by their faculty in their first semester "through use of a formal language screening test" (Martin et al, 2002, p. 5).

Despite these initiatives, participation in DELA was in decline in 2007 and 2008; students most in need of intervention were not being identified early enough in their degree. The voluntary nature of the test meant that many students ignored faculty advice, believing that they had already satisfied the language entry requirements; others were concerned about the stigma, described by Elder and von Randow as the "fear of being branded linguistically inept" (2008, p. 190). Further compelling reasons for rethinking the University's approach to language assessment and support was the curriculum restructure, introduced in 2008 as the 'Melbourne Model', which reduced 60 specialist degrees to six generalist 'New Generation' undergraduate degrees (see http://www.provost.unimelb.edu.au/melbourne_model). As noted by the Task Force on English Language Bridging and Support Programs, "A high level of competence in communication is among the set of qualities that we desire for graduates of the Melbourne Model" (*Application of the proposed framework*, 2007, p. 1). It seemed timely to introduce compulsory testing and support in this new environment.

DELA and test administration

Developed by the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC), DELA is a timed test of one hour and 45 minutes. It tests the academic reading, writing and listening skills required for university-level study, and identifies the strengths

and weaknesses in these three areas. Each subtest in DELA uses a variety of methods to determine language comprehension and competency. The reading subtest, 45 minutes long, is comprised of two reading passages totaling 1,500 words, with cloze, true/false, and short answer among the set of questions. The writing subtest, 30 minutes in length, is an argumentative essay; students are provided with a set of information upon which they can expand using their own ideas. The listening subtest, 30 minutes long, is a lecture that students listen to and recall information by answering questions and completing a diagram. The reliability and validity of DELA are well documented in the literature, and in fact, DELA is used in a number of national and international universities because of this.

The ASU is the central university provider for academic and language skills development at the UoM. In addition to a university-wide English for Academic Purposes suite of programs, the ASU also provides degree-specific language programs, individual tutorials and self-access resources, both print and electronic. It has been coordinating the administration of DELA, in collaboration with the LTRC, since 2004. The ASU is responsible for promotion, faculty liaison, results dissemination and reporting; the LTRC is responsible for test development, validation, invigilation and scoring. The ASU owns and maintains the database responsible for calibrating the results and recommendations, and distributing them to students and faculties. The two units work closely in matters related to policy advice, evaluation and training.

Engaging stakeholders

Communicate widely

Communicating the new policy was the first critical step in the implementation process. We discovered through hindsight that the most effective strategy was to target as many stakeholders as possible at both the strategic and operational levels. The ASU thus worked across a number of areas and levels within the University to ensure that stakeholders, both internal and external, were informed and prepared. Our first priority was to ensure that prospective students knew about and understood the policy. The risk was clear: a negative perception of DELA could impact enrolment figures. Recruitment and Admissions were already concerned about ‘negative marketing’, so it was important to consider not only the information we delivered, but how we delivered it. We needed to ensure that the benefits of testing were clear, positive and student-friendly. To this end, the ASU established a DELA webpage: outwardly facing for our future students, inclusive in its language to target both local and international students, and positive in identifying the advantages of DELA. We wanted students to see the benefits of the policy and equally important, to see the UoM as a step ahead of other universities: study here and you will have the advantage of the DELA and dedicated programs to support academic language development.

In addition to the DELA website, the ASU liaised with the relevant internal groups responsible for communicating the policy externally. For example, in collaboration with International Student Services, the ASU conducted a number of information sessions for our international agents. As our ‘voice’ overseas, they needed to ‘sell’ DELA to potential students; to do this meant developing an understanding of the rationale behind the policy as well as its benefits. We also worked with colleagues in Recruitment to present at a forum for Melbourne Schools Partnership International (MSPI). A number of our international students use the secondary school as a pathway to enter university, and as was noted above, the VCE ESL cohort is one of our potentially at risk groups. With Admissions and Recruitment, the ASU was keen to establish a dialog. We needed their assistance in developing a table of threshold language scores so that agents and students could determine who was required to take DELA. We also needed their ‘future students’ webpage on language entry requirements to link to our DELA webpage. The head of Recruitment ensured that schools were notified of the new requirement for domestic, native speakers to sit DELA.

The ASU also collaborated with the LTRC and faculties to create a letter template to communicate the requirement to identified students. Each faculty had input into the language and tone of the letter, and could also adapt the letter to their specifications. As with the website, inclusivity and positivity were critical to ensure the message was effective. Using inclusive language, such as, “You, along with many other beginning university students....” We were also clear to mention the University’s pledge to assisting students optimize academic outcome through the provision of dedicated academic language programs: “The University of Melbourne is committed to supporting you to further develop your academic language skills and maximise your success.”

Use established forums and relationships

Communicating the policy internally required the ASU to take advantage of existing forums. Although the post-entry testing policy had already been communicated to deans, faculty general managers and course standing committee

chairs (responsible for the New Generation degree curriculum), it was not well-known at the operational level. It was therefore important for the ASU to focus its communication strategy at this level.

We did this in two ways. The first was through the Student Services Network. Chaired by the Vice Principal and Academic Registrar, and comprised of faculty student center managers along with the Student Advice Program manager, the ASU used this forum to facilitate consultation and agreement at the managerial level. We needed faculty consensus and commitment about use of common processes to identify, contact and refer students to DELA. We also needed a common voice to do this. It was critical that each faculty provided the same message to students about the benefits of the DELA and the University's commitment to supporting students.

The ASU also relied on an informal network of faculty contacts originally set up to aid in the referral of students to DELA when it was still voluntary in nature. Many of these 'DELA contacts' later became 'student advisers', a position created specifically to support the vision of the Melbourne Model (see <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/abp/talqac/pdf/msam.pdf>). The ASU had a long history of collaboration with this group and used this relationship to aid in the policy roll out at the student-facing level. Through regular email and phone contact, the ASU provided information and updates, answered questions, advised on policy matters and acted as a resource. Because testing was now compulsory, the stakes were much higher – as were the risks. These new student advisers were at the coal face of the policy implementation, and its success depended on how informed and confident they were. Through regular communication and support, this group was able to operationalise the policy to a high degree of success.

Provide training

Under the Melbourne Model, the newly created position of student adviser, mentioned above, played a pivotal role in supporting students from commencement to graduation by providing course advice, monitoring progress, and ensuring access to resources and services. It therefore made sense that our newly appointed student advisers also understood the language policy. To this effect, the ASU collaborated with the Student Advice Program to develop a series of training modules about DELA and language support. The broad objectives of the two modules were to ensure student advisers and other student facing staff were informed of the policy and could apply it effectively.

The first training module thus aimed to increase knowledge of the policy: those students it targeted and the various degree-specific language programs to which they should be referred. This program also aimed to develop the skills to communicate positively the benefits of DELA. This latter point, we were beginning to realise, was critical. Many students were contacting the student centres to challenge the requirement to sit DELA. The majority were native speakers who did not believe the policy applied to them. Thus the training enabled these student facing staff to develop the skills to persuade this cohort of not only the benefits of testing, but also the mandatory nature of the policy, the latter being particularly tricky because of the absence of a tangible punishment for non-compliance.

The second training module focused on raising awareness of the critical role language plays in academic success, on developing networks between student advisers and language providers, and on increasing understanding of the DELA results. Student advisers were expected to discuss the DELA results with students, and refer to language enrichment programs depending on their individual needs. However, without a background in TESOL or linguistics, our student advisers felt unprepared to effectively discuss the test results with students. Thus, for the latter module, the ASU co-developed and taught it with the LTRC. Roles plays and scenarios were introduced to assist student advisers in the communication of results and referrals.

Creating targeted language programs

Consult and collaborate

One of the distinguishing features of the UoM's post-entry language testing policy is faculty autonomy in determining a language enrichment program. The degree-specificity of the policy is one of its unique features. By allowing faculties to determine language programs that "align with their degree structure, curriculum design and approaches to teaching and learning" (Application of the proposed framework 2007, p.13), Academic Board was affirming that language is best acquired within the context of a discipline. Research was also telling us that contextualised language learning is more relevant and meaningful (Kasper, 1997; Song, 2006; Peelo & Luxon, 2007; Baik & Grieg, 2009). By embedding language in the curriculum, students better develop the linguistic, rhetorical and cross cultural skills they need to engage more fully in their studies. Peelo and Luxon suggest that "[t]o view activities such as writing or 'note-

taking' as skills that have no intellectual context leaves students only partially prepared for their courses and comes close to promoting 'content' free learning as desirable (or, indeed, possible)" (2007, p. 66).

Thus the ASU began to consult with faculties about the kind of language enrichment program that would both fit within the degree structure and also support the development of disciplinary-based language skills. We already had evidence that students who participated regularly in a discipline-based language program in one UoM faculty (Baik & Grieg, 2009; Bailey & Smith, 2010) not only passed the subject, but had better results than those whose participation was intermittent or nil; further, that these students continued to perform at a higher standard in their second and third years of undergraduate study (Baik & Grieg, 2009). This information, as well as the bonus of supporting identified students within the degree – as opposed to a generic language program – convinced a further four faculties to develop discipline-based academic language programs in collaboration with the ASU.

These embedded language programs had several positive spin off effects. The first was the relationship building between faculty academics and ASU language specialists. The ASU collaborated with academics to align skills and activities with the subject content and assessments. Academics began to consult ASU advisers more regularly about strategies for teaching NNES students, and to refer more students to our programs. In one faculty, the ASU adviser became part of the teaching team: she was introduced with the other lecturers and tutors in the first lecture, invited to attend subject meetings and planning days, and asked to contribute a chapter on academic and language skills for the subject's textbook. This kind of relationship is an example, we believe, of best practice in delivering embedded language programs.

In addition to the liaison with faculty academics, the ASU also worked closely with the student centres to promote the language programs. We knew from the University of Auckland's experience that many students misunderstand the nature of the support, often disregarding the faculty-specific language program or choosing one less suited to their needs (Bright and von Randow, 2004). Therefore the ASU assigned willing faculties with a language specialist whose role was to speak with identified students during orientation. Our conversations with students corroborated Bright and von Randow's research: students believed the degree-based language programs were 'just another grammar class'. In addition to individual conversations with students, the ASU also delivered group sessions about DELA and follow-up support. In one faculty, a special lunch was organized to encourage students to participate in the DELA session and get to know their language instructor. The lunch was also intended to build on the positive message about DELA and support. These kinds of initiatives helped to change their flawed perception of support. Students were therefore more likely to enroll in language programs.

Refining practices

Evaluate and report

Once the Policy had been implemented, the ASU set up a debriefing meeting with our 'DELA contacts', the LTRC and Admissions. Our aim was to learn from our stakeholders what worked, what did not, and how we could improve process and outcome. This forum, which now takes place after each orientation, allows faculties to share their experiences and provide input into systemic improvements. For example, feedback in 2010 recommended eliminating faculty-specific DELA sessions and replacing them with sessions open to all students. Rationale for this change was the number of students who believed that the faculty-DELA session was the only one they could attend, even though multiple options were offered. Many students thus missed out on testing, and of course this meant a lower compliance rate. This forum has also been instrumental in improving practices for advising and monitoring students. For example, one faculty's practice of hosting an information lunch for students was shared with others who were struggling to engage students in their language programs.

A final strategy that the ASU employs to engage faculties is our regular reporting cycle. We not only report bi-annually on DELA participation and compliance, but also on faculty usage of language programs. These reports make recommendations to the University on how to improve operations, widen participation and ensure greater access to language support. Reporting has two functions: it keeps DELA and language issues on the University's agenda; it also helps ensure a degree of accountability. Regarding the former, the DELA reports identify trends in test participation and compliance, those cohorts most at risk because of linguistic competence, and the challenges encountered with implementation. For example, the semester 1, 2010 report identified the VCE ESL pathway as producing students most likely to score in the support required band on DELA (3.3 of less out of 6). The semester 2, 2009 report recommended the need to review the current exclusion of graduate students in the policy, corroborated by a recent ASU usage report showing uneven access to language programs at the graduate level. With regards to accountability,

reporting does put pressure on faculties to improve their compliance rates. These reports therefore help inform policy direction and improve outcomes.

Outcomes

Successes

There were a number of positive outcomes of the language policy. The first was the increased awareness and responsiveness to the issue of language proficiency and its relationship to academic outcome across the university. For the first time, programs were developed at the local level to support the objectives of the policy; student centre staff undertook training about the DELA and how to communicate effectively with students; central language specialists regularly collaborated with faculty academics; students made enquiries about taking DELA: what it was, why they needed to take it, when it was being offered, when would they get their results. When students volunteered to take DELA because they believed it would 'help them in their studies', we knew that the policy was having a positive impact. Language development became normal and enriching rather than remedial. Significantly, this awareness raising has created an active partnership between the University and the student in achieving language competency, in alignment with the *Good practice principles* (DEEWR, 2009).

The second was the increase in participation: 50% more students were assessed by DELA in 2009 than in the previous year. This upward trend, although not as robust, continued in 2010, with an increase of 31% over pre-language policy years. Compliance with support has also improved: in 2010 74% of students required to enrol in language programs did so, and many others voluntarily enrolled. This suggests that if we can actually assess them, students will follow the recommendations for further language development. Thus early identification and intervention were occurring at much higher rates because of the policy's mandatory nature.

Finally, there is the rich data the policy is generating. For example, DELA results are showing that it is our international students entering through the VCE ESL pathway that are most at risk because of language. How might this information inform schools and Admissions? Is there a correlation between test scores and academic progress? Can we refine our policy over time in line with what the data is telling us? Clearly there is an opportunity for research using this data that should not be missed.

Challenges

Despite these very positive outcomes, the policy implementation was not without its challenges. Perhaps the most striking has been the issue of compliance. Test compliance across faculties ranges from 4% to 75%. Despite the compulsory nature of the policy, there is no tangible consequence for failure to comply. This 'pushback' to testing across all cohorts is an indicator that we still need to improve communication to students about the benefits of DELA, and change the negative perception of 'testing'.

Further, the University needs to continue to communicate both the ongoing imperative to develop language proficiency in the course of the degree, and the inherent responsibility of each student this is. To facilitate this, it will also need to consider how to further embed language and academic skills in the curriculum across all three years of the degree, rather than just the first year, a recommendation by AUQA in our recent audit.

Finally, the University needs to reconsider whether the DELA in its current paper-based form is the most effective, and equally, whether it is an appropriate language assessment for native and non-native speakers alike. A proposal to move to an online screening test suitable for both groups is currently suffering from funding cutbacks.

Conclusion

The ASU employed a number of strategies to engage faculties and other stakeholders in the policy implementation. Communication and collaboration were essential, as were evaluation and reporting. On reflection, we could argue that the active partnership between our stakeholders ensured the success of the implementation. It was a whole of university approach. From the Vice Principal Academic Registrar to the student centres: everyone was involved. Admissions identified the students requiring testing, and student advisers notified them, advising and tracking compliance. Deans and academics collaborated with language support staff in the development of degree-based language programs. The ASU and Student Advice Program rolled out a training program. The ASU inter-faced with

all these groups as the central coordinating body to initiate communication, enable systemic practices, evaluate effectiveness and report on outcomes.

In the two years since implementation of the policy, there has been a university-wide increase in the awareness of how language impacts on study experience and academic outcome. Participation in DELA has lifted significantly. English language assessment is inclusive and integrated into the life cycle of the student; language programs are viewed as inherent to discipline understanding and skills growth. We are still in the early years, but the whole of university approach employed by the ASU may provide other universities with some useful strategies for engaging with stakeholders.

References

Application of the proposed framework for English language entry requirements and support programs to New Generation University of Melbourne degrees. (2007). Unpublished report from the University of Melbourne.

Australian Universities Quality Agency (2010). *Report of an audit of the University of Melbourne.* Retrieved November 7, 2010, from http://www.auqa.edu.au/files/reports/auditreport_uom_2010.pdf

Baik, C. & Greig, J. (2009). Improving the academic outcomes of undergraduate ESL students: the case for discipline-based academic skills programs. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(4), 401-416.

Bailey, A. & Smith, E. (2010). Adjunct ESL tutorial programs for first year students at the University of Melbourne. *Proceedings of the 21st ISANA International Education Conference, 30 November-35 December, 2010.* Grand Promenade, Melbourne: Conference Organising Committee for the 21st ISANA International Conference.

Birrell, B. (2006). Implications of low English standards among overseas students at Australian universities. *People and Place*, 14(4), 53-64.

Bright, C., & von Randow, J. (2004). Tracking language test consequences: the student perspective. *Proceedings of the 18th IDP Australian International Education Conference, 5-8 October, 2004.* Sydney: Sydney Convention Centre. Retrieved May 8, 2009, from <http://www.aiec.idp.com/pdf/thur%20-%20Bright%20&%20Randow.pdf>

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009). *Good practice principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities.* Retrieved April 17, 2009, from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Publications/Pages/GoodPracticePrinciples.aspx>

Elder, C., & von Randow, J. (2008). Exploring the utility of a web-based English language screening tool. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 5(3), 173-194.

Kasper, L.F., (1997). The impact of content-based instructional programs on the academic progress of ESL students. *English for Specific Purposes*, 16(4), 309-320.

Larcombe, W., & Malkin, I. (2008). Identifying students likely to benefit from language support in first-year Law. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 27(4), 319-329.

Martin, L., McPhee, P., Rickards, F., & Skene, L. (2002). *Diagnostic Testing and English Language Support Programs.* Unpublished report from the University of Melbourne.

O'Loughlin, K. & Arkoudis, S. (2009). Investigating IELTS exit score gains in higher education. *IELTS Research Reports*, 10, 95-138.

Peelo, M. & Luxon, T. (2007). Designing embedded courses to support international students' cultural and academic adjustment in the UK. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31(1), 65-76.

Ransom, L., Larcombe, W., & Baik, C. (2005). English language needs and support: International ESL students' perceptions and expectations. *Proceedings of the 16th ISANA International Conference, 29 November-2 December,*

2005 [CD-ROM]. Hotel Grand Chancellor, Christchurch, New Zealand: Conference Organising Committee for the 16th ISANA International Conference.

Song, B. (2006). Content-based ESL instruction: Long-term effects and outcomes. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25, 420-437.

Survey of final year international students on their experience of the University of Melbourne: International students who completed a course during 2004. (2005). Retrieved July 21, 2009, from the University of Melbourne, Finance and Planning Group website http://www.upo.unimelb.edu.au/Public/Qual_Eval/Evaluation/WV_ECPub_ISSS_2004_FullRep.pdf

Laurie Ransom © 2008. The authors assign to ISANA and educational and non-profit institutions a nonexclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive licence to ISANA to publish this document in full in the Conference Proceedings. Those documents may be published on the World Wide Web, CD-ROM, in printed form, and on mirror sites on the World Wide Web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.