Post-entry English language assessment in Australian universities: issues and prospects

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OVERVIEW

• Review state of PELA at Australian universities
• Note issues arising from current situation
• Propose future actions
Principle 7
Assessment of language development needs

• Students’ English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.

Example of good practice

The university encourages and supports international students (and others) to undertake a diagnostic assessment of their development needs for English language proficiency at a very early stage of their studies. The university offers students opportunities to self-assess their language skills throughout their studies and to undertake developmental activities in response to the needs they identify.

How prevalent is post-entry language assessment (PELA) in Australian universities?

• Data gathered as part of a study conducted in 2011 at UoM (Knoch et al. 2011) reveals that

• Of 38 Australian universities surveyed
  9 (23%) not using PELA
  8 (21%) not using PELA but reviewing policies with a view to introducing PELA
  9 (23%) have small Faculty-based PELA initiatives
  13 (34%) have university wide policy
How is PELA implemented across different university contexts?

- Target population
- Status of test
- Skills assessed
- Mode of delivery
- Reporting of test results
- Interface with language development

Target population

- All incoming students
- International students only
- EAL students, whether international or domestic
- Particular “at risk” groups (e.g., below 7 on IELTS or equivalent admission test, below 35/50 on end-of-school English/ESL exam, Foundation students)
- Faculty-specific policies

Issue: negative perceptions of PELA by targeted students
The thing I have found with DELA is that they are really resistant to do it; particularly local students (native speakers), they feel that it is aimed at international students...even international students will not want to do it. They say well I got in here, why should I sit this test (representative – Commerce Student Centre).

[I think that universal testing is better for a whole lot of reasons. Its face validity is better and also there has been so much emphasis on capturing at risk students, this university is supposed to be a university of excellence. How is it identifying which student might want to improve or excel in their English - it's a sort of remedial model, all this (DELA). So I am very much in favour of universal testing for that reason. (representative of Faculty of Education)

Status of assessment

- PELA is optional for all (see GP Principle 3 re student responsibility)
- PELA is mandated for all students
- PELA Is mandated for particular student categories
- Status of PELA differs from faculty to faculty

Issues:
- How to communicate purpose of PELA as aid to language development? (Read, 2008)
- What incentives for participation in cases where PELA is optional?  
- How to reconcile notions of compulsion and compliance with notion of PELA as facilitative?  
- What sanctions (if any) to impose on non-compliant students where PELA is mandatory?
Assessment design

Skills assessed

- language macro-skills such as reading, listening, writing (speaking less common due to high costs)
  - writing only
- language macro-skills plus sub-skills (e.g., vocabulary and grammar)
  - language AND numeracy skills
- screening tasks (indirect measures) only or in combination with other skills

Issues:
- Different constructs at different institutions – academic language proficiency, academic literacy/ies/ communication skills? (Murray, 2010)
- Limited validity evidence in many cases, including lack of empirical basis for cut-scores (Davies, & Elder, 2004; Elder & von Randow, 2009)

Test delivery and reporting

DELIVERY
- Pencil and paper
- Online (majority) with or without automated scoring
- (Repeated) access from home without identity check
- Test delivered in laboratory/classroom with identity check

REPORTING
- No scores but recommendation regarding support needs sent to student and Faculty representative
- Score with descriptive profile and advice re language development
- Writing sample made available if requested
- Advisor works through results with student

Issues:
- Timing of assessment - how early in the academic year?
- How diagnostic and userfriendly are the reports offered to students? (Alderson, 2005, Knoch, forthcoming)
Interface with language development

• PELA results used to direct students to:
  - credit bearing courses as part of their degree program
  - supplementary short courses targeting particular skills
  - discipline-specific tutorials
  - one-on-one feedback on essays/assignments
  - self-access materials

• PELA results used to stream students into groups

Issues:
- How suitable are available development options to diverse population of students? How tailored to particular assessment profiles?
- Should language development courses be mandatory? What sanctions for non-compliance if so?
- How much language development is enough? Who decides?
- Are available language development options effective? What evidence?

(…) how do you manage support for the whole cohort of students that will be tested? At the moment the support that is offered varies from faculty to faculty and is quite variable. Some of them direct students to the ASU and coursework subjects and some have own arrangements. Again it’s that follow up – what do the students do with this information? There’s no coordinated approach to the follow up (ASU representative)

It seems a lot of the language support stuff looks like it is aimed at international students rather than just being like, short courses - first year students -how to get along in your courses, or something like that. There needs to be different marketing around it (student advisor – Commerce student Centre)
PROSPECTS

- Form cross-university consortium to pool information and resources in relation to PELA
- Establish principles and guidelines for PELA design and delivery
- Set up mechanisms for ongoing evidence-based evaluation of PELA assessment tools and associated language development options
- Consider options and modes for self-assessment in the context of tertiary study

REFERENCES