Post-entry language assessment in Australian higher education – A brief overview

Paul Moore, December, 2012

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of post-entry language assessment (PELA) in the context of Australian higher education, which may inform the use of language tests for various purposes. Four types of assessment were identified: self-assessment tools; screening tools; diagnostic tests and exit tests. The report presents criteria which have been used for evaluating language tests, provides summary data for 11 PELAs, and outlines benefits of, and concerns regarding PELAs, as identified in recent literature.

1. Post-entry language assessment (PELA)

PELA aims to identify students who may benefit from further English language development through their university studies (Barrett-Lennard et al., 2011) and/or identify academic language needs (Read, 2008). The aim is then to direct students to services which may assist their (academic) language development. While there are some examples of tests designed for students to gain insights into their own English language proficiency, the main types of test are as follows:

- **Self-assessment tools**: tests which allow learners to get a general idea about their English language proficiency level. These are rare in the literature, and may include short online tests on grammar, vocabulary and reading (e.g., SALNA). They may also be linked to advice about support services;
- **Screening tools**: short (sometimes online) tests of vocabulary, reading and/or grammar designed to identify students requiring further diagnosis testing, and to ‘screen out’ those who score above so-called ‘threshold’ scores (no intervention needed);
- **Diagnostic tests**: longer, mostly paper-based tests aimed at supplying more specific information about areas for development;
- **Exit tests**: some universities offer subsidised IELTS exit tests as a ‘value-adding’ exercise for students who may need IELTS for professional purposes post-graduation.

A range of test types are used for each purpose above and some tests are used for more than one purpose, with different conditions attached. For example, UniSA’s English Language Self-Assessment Tool (ELSAT) is based on a screening tool and students initially were required to take the test if they wished to book individual consultations (Hicks, 2012).

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1. While exit tests are not classified as PELA, they are included here because they are often considered along with PELAs.
Table 1. General application of available tests/assessment tools (see Table 2 for acronym descriptions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-assessment</th>
<th>Password; ELSA; DIALANG; UniEnglish; ELSAT; SALNA (confidence of results for some tests is not clear – i.e., accessibility of online instant results and results of written tasks).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Screening tools</td>
<td>DELNA screening; AEST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic tests/assessment tools</td>
<td>DELNA Diagnosis; ELSAT; DELA; Password; UniEnglish; SALNA; MASUS; other customised generic and discipline-specific assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit testing (e.g., for professional registration)</td>
<td>IELTS; Occupational English Test (OET).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Criteria for evaluating language tests

Tim Moore (2010) in a report for Swinburne Professional Learning (SPL), provided test evaluative criteria, loosely based on Bachman and Palmer’s (1996) test qualities (validity, reliability, quantity, equity, scrutiny, sustainability and efficacy; see Appendix 1 for description). He used these criteria to compare assessment instruments in use at Australian universities (three generic: DELA, DELNA, UniEnglish; one discipline-specific: MASUS; see Appendix 2 for summary of evaluation). Elder (2008; cited in Knoch & Elder, 2012) also provides qualities of a good PELA and principles for good PELA policy.

Aspects of PELAs reported on by Moore included the following: name of instrument; source; what tested (ELP; academic literacy; professional literacy); which skills; mode of test; who takes test; compulsory/voluntary; when administered; time to complete; form of result; referral to language program/support; cost of acquiring; cost of administering. Other issues worth investigating are whether there is immediate or delayed feedback; whether the service is confidential; and what washback effects might be anticipated.

Generally, as might be expected, larger generic tests were seen as more reliable and less valid than smaller discipline-specific tests. The efficacy of such tests is dependent on context and purposes to which the tests are put. Tim Moore’s recommendations for SPL included both generic measures (mandatory screening test and a more comprehensive self-assessment), along with MASUS-style procedure in targeted first-year subjects.

3. PELAs in use in Australian higher education

Table 2 below provides data on 11 PELA options currently used in universities in Australia and New Zealand.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Name of test</strong></th>
<th><strong>Provider</strong></th>
<th><strong>Type of test</strong></th>
<th><strong>Time (mins)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Purposes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Comments</strong></th>
<th><strong>Costs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **DELNA Screening test**  
(Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment) | University of Auckland, Auckland UniServices Ltd. | Generic Web-based screening tool.  
- vocabulary task (7 mins); timed reading (*cloze-elide*) task (10 mins) | 30 | “to filter out those who have enough English to acquire academic literacy independently – this is normally about 2/3 of our intake” (DELNA Info Pack, 2010) | Security and admin support – one supervising staff member for 25-30 students | NZD 5000 per year for DELNA Screening  
NZD 2500 per year for short extra writing task  
plus training and administration and interface customisation |
| **DELNA Diagnosis** | University of Auckland (lic. From LTRC, University of Melbourne) | Generic Paper-based Listening to a mini lecture;  
- Reading academic-type texts;  
- Writing: an interpretation of a graph | 120 | “a more extensive, task-based assessment of [students’] academic language skills” (Read, 2008: 183). | Marked on site by staff trained by DELNA staff.  
(future? speaking;  
online diagnosis; Read & von Randow, 2011) | See DELA costs below |
| **Academic English Screening Test (AEST)**  
(initially made for UniSA “English language self-assessment tool” (ELSAT)) | LTRC, University of Melbourne / UniSA | Generic Online Text completion  
Timed reading writing | 60 | At UniSA: “to check your English language and see whether you qualify for extra language and learning services” (UniSA L³ website) | Technical issues;  
students can’t access individual consultations unless they take ELSAT (Kokkinn, 2012) | Costing not available @ Dec. 2012 |
| **DELA**  
(Diagnostic English Language Assessment) | Language and Testing Research Centre (LTRC),  
University of Melbourne | Generic Paper-based  
- Reading (45 mins);  
- Writing (30 mins) | 105 | “designed to test the academic language skills needed for university-level study” | Versions also used by Monash and RMIT (T. Moore, 2010: 7) | $15000+ per year plus administration (T. Moore, 2010) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Password</strong></td>
<td>English Language Testing Ltd.</td>
<td>Generic online grammar and vocabulary (optional writing) 75 multiple choice questions</td>
<td>60 90 with writing 120-130 if reading included</td>
<td>“establishing indicative language levels” (Humphreys, cited in Grant, 2012)</td>
<td>Future (July 2012 semi-adaptive reading test 30-40 mins); non-secure individual version (same version for all takers); secure randomised version for diagnostic testing</td>
<td>$19 per test for 100; $15 for 1000; $13 for 5000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA)</strong></td>
<td>Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)</td>
<td>Reading, writing, listening, grammar</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>ELSA is designed to assess the readiness of non-native English speakers seeking entrance to Foundation Year and Tertiary programs</td>
<td>The test assesses low and intermediate level English language skills.</td>
<td>The first 200 candidates are $20 each. After this, the test fee is reduced to $15 per candidate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DIALANG</strong></td>
<td>Lancaster University</td>
<td>reading, writing, listening, grammar and vocabulary</td>
<td>30-45</td>
<td>Self-assessment/general proficiency</td>
<td>Currently unfunded and unsupported</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UniEnglish</strong></td>
<td>Curtin University</td>
<td>Generic online; reading, use of English, Listening, writing (optional)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Optional self assessment</td>
<td>UniEnglish was accessed by 66% of new students in 2009, only 14% of those went on to complete it (Barrett-Lenard et al. 2011: A101)</td>
<td>Approx $10,000 to license @ 2010 (T. Moore, 2010) + admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SALNA</strong> (Swinburne academic literacy needs)</td>
<td>Swinburne University of Technology</td>
<td>Generic online; Word meanings; Language use;</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2 parts: language snapshot &amp; writing profile</td>
<td>Free, voluntary and confidential</td>
<td>This was created by Swinburne for local use. Development costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of test</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Type of test</td>
<td>Time (mins)</td>
<td>Purposes</td>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>Costs</td>
</tr>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>assessment)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Information retrieval</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not known.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paper: writing profile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MASUS (Measure of academic skills of university students)</td>
<td>University of Sydney</td>
<td>Discipline specific</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Admin costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not a test; grading scale for written work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboratively or locally developed customised tests</td>
<td>LTRC and other test developers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tailor-made tests to evaluate impact of particular programs on English language proficiency and focused achievement tests.</td>
<td>Demand and cost; Ownership of the diagnostic tool allows them to change the tasks to suit the faculty and test validity (Harris, 2010)</td>
<td>variable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. PELA: Benefits and concerns

Following is a summary of benefits and concerns regarding PELA identified in recent literature.

Dunworth (2009), in an important review paper, identified the following benefits and concerns for students and institutions regarding PELAs:

Benefits for students:

- Capacity to identify students’ “needs”;
- Engenders the ability for students to identify their own language performance and to take control of their own learning;
- Points students towards tailored programs;
- Potential for students to assess language development in an ongoing way and measure progress towards graduation.

Benefits for institutions:

- Information from PELAs could be used to develop new services in curricula;
- Assist in assessing “literacy-based components of graduate attributes” (p. A6);
- Help compare entrance pathways.

Concerns about assessment tools:

- Construct validity – is the test appropriate to a tertiary environment?
- Contextualised tests are more useful than online grammar tests;
- PELAs should not be seen as significant in comparison to other indicators of student performance;
- Underlying constructs being tested; should they be tested separately? (e.g., academic literacies distinct from English language proficiency).

Concerns about subsequent language development:

- Integrated within disciplines or separate;
- Mandatory or optional;
- Potential negative impact on students (stigma);
- Staff, time, resource development;
- Funding models; e.g., some faculties fund discipline-specific PELAs;
- Universities implementing PELA without “planning or being able to resource the next step” (p. A9).

Ransom (2009) provides the following perspective on the University of Melbourne’s experience in introducing mandatory PELA:

Benefits:

- Faculties had to articulate and promote a preferred language enrichment program;
- Enhanced understanding of language issues by faculty student centre administration (professional development and awareness of international student experience);
• Increased student understanding of the rationale behind testing;
• Increasing incidence of language specialists being invited to contribute to curriculum development;
• Raised awareness of both universities’ and students’ responsibility to focus on language development.

Concerns about communication and coordination:

• Focus on academic language skills only;
• Absence of central coordinating authority;
• General lack of understanding of, and lack of universal commitment to policy;
• Students confused about the purpose;
• Difficulty in communicating the “compulsory” nature of the program;
• Lack of familiarity with relevant language programs; and
• Extra work.

Concerns about test compliance:

• no systematic follow-up of non-compliant students;
• student perspective that it’s not applicable; and
• students avoided the test because of stigma; also late arrivals.

Concerns about support compliance:

• student expectations that subject teachers will help them; and
• Non-credit programs (student attendance sporadic or decreases over time).

Finally, universities in Western Australia have trialled online tests and reverted to paper-based writing assessments:

Although computer-based diagnostic or screening PELAs are highly regarded in terms of both logistics and resources, in neither case was the online environment judged as satisfactory to the purposes of the PELA, which was intended to identify students who required additional English language development during their studies. Issues included technical problems such as slow computer speeds, questions about the validity of the instruments used, and unsustainable pressures put on computer rooms given the perceived need for a “secure” test environment. Following these trials (see, for example, Harris, 2010), both universities adopted short written tasks similar to those administered at the University of Technology, Sydney (Barthel, 2009), these being evaluated as the most cost-effective and appropriate for assessments that required moderation. (Barrett-Lennard et al., A101).

5. Exit Testing

IELTS exit testing is seen as ‘value-adding’ in that students are often required to take IELTS as part of their professional registration (e.g., Nursing, Accounting) or for immigration purposes. UQ was
reportedly the first university in the country to offer subsidised IELTS testing, but other universities (Melbourne, Griffith) are said to have since piloted more limited versions.

*Example programs*

- Griffith *IELTS4Grads* – 50% funded;
- UQ *Graduate Testing Program* – fully-funded.

As an example, an uptake of 250 students per semester and an IELTS charge of $330 per candidate equate to $82500 p.a. (50% funded) or $165000 p.a. (fully-funded) plus administration, reporting and research costs. For recent research measuring changes in student IELTS scores over time in Australian higher education, see Craven (2012), Humphreys & Mousavi, 2010, Humphreys et al. (in press), and O’Loughlin and Arkoudis (2009).

6. Conclusion

Given the ongoing reporting of individual universities’ experiences with PELA and the willingness of those involved to give advice, universities considering implementing PELA are well-placed to learn from the experience of other universities in developing a broader, more systematic approach to PELA than currently exists. It is expected that there will be major challenges regarding policy and implementation, and that these will be lessened if a clear purpose for the use of different PELAs is described (including definitions of underlying constructs), if clear links are made between PELAs and available discipline-specific and generic supports, and if resources are made available in response to likely increases in demand on support services.
7. References


Hicks, M. (2012, October) *Implementing a university wide approach to English Language Proficiency*. Invited presentation, University of Wollongong, 23 October.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria used for evaluation of assessment instruments</th>
<th>DELA</th>
<th>UniEnglish</th>
<th>DELNA Screening</th>
<th>MASUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Validity – What is the underlying construct of the test/instrument? Does the test measure what it purports to measure? Is it relevant in some way to students’ studies?</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability – How consistent are results on the test? Does the test render the same results when it is given on different occasions, or to different cohorts? Can the test be used for benchmarking against other tests/language channels?</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity – How much of the target test cohort is able to be captured by the testing procedures?</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity - Is the testing process a fair one? Is there the potential for test-takers to feel discriminated against or disadvantaged in any way by taking the test?</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scrutiny – Are the results of the test available to the institution, and able to be used to direct/refer students to relevant support programs? Is there potential to monitor uptake on support programs?</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability – How administratively complex is test administration? What financial costs are involved?</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy – How much is the testing process likely to lead to positive educational outcomes for students and the university? In this particular context, positive outcomes would involve relevant students both accessing and benefiting from available language and academic support programs. Positive outcomes might also involve the development of improved methods of assessment and feedback used across the institution generally.</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2. Evaluation of assessment strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) (based on T. Moore, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria (Dependent on context and purpose to which test is put)</th>
<th>DELA</th>
<th>UniEnglish</th>
<th>DELNA Screening</th>
<th>MASUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Validity - W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability - S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity - S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity - W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scrutiny - S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability - W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy (Dependent on context and purpose to which test is put)</td>
<td>Generic; unrelated to study</td>
<td>Best seen as a learning resource; lack of reporting</td>
<td>Quick; way of testing out “linguistically-able” students – used in conjunction with longer diagnosis</td>
<td>Criteria for evaluation of writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>