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University post-enrolment English language assessment: a consideration of the issues

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Abstract

As universities face increasing numbers of international students who meet English language entry criteria but subsequently struggle with the language demands of their courses, many are contemplating instituting some form of post-enrolment language assessment. The purpose of such assessment is to identify, early on, those at greatest risk due to weak language skills and to direct them to the supports available. This paper considers some of the key issues motivating such assessment and impacting on its implementation.

Background

There has been a good deal of discussion recently, both within and across universities in Australia, around post-enrolment language assessment (PELA). This flurry of activity has been driven primarily by two critical factors, the first of which concerns the significant increase in the number of students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) resulting from migration and the globalisation of education. During 1999-2004, student mobility—the number of students entering Australia for the purpose of study—grew by 43%, from 1.75 to 2.5 million students, with Australia's on-campus student numbers increasing by 95% in the same period (Cook, 2008). Indeed, in 2007 the OECD cited Australia as having the fifth largest number of tertiary international students globally and the highest percentage in higher education (OECD, 2007). In 2009, 490,000 foreign students studied in Australian institutions, representing a considerable source of income for an education and training industry worth some $16 billion a year (Burgess, 2010).

While such numbers provide an important source of university funding and—for those who remain in Australia—of skilled human capital, they also provide a challenge for those responsible for designing and delivering higher education programs, who frequently find themselves having to impart material to students lacking adequate levels of communicative competence and thus unable to comprehend course content and interact effectively with their tutors and peers. This can engender feelings of frustration in staff (Ferguson, 1996), who find themselves toning down and adjusting their delivery of course content in order to make it accessible to students with weak language skills (Birrell, 2006, Bretag, 2007; Sawir 2005); while for the students concerned, it can lead to feelings of anxiety, marginalisation and disempowerment. Universities have an ethical responsibility to establish measures which help ensure that these individuals can engage and achieve their full potential both as students and as graduates. A prerequisite to doing so is to identify those most at risk, for few if any institutions will have the resources necessary to support *all* at-risk students. PELA, therefore, would serve as a mechanism for determining eligibility for support by identifying those most vulnerable.

The second factor that has motivated universities to consider PELA is the 2009 publication by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) of the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Competence for International Students in Australian Universities* (GPPs). This set of ten principles is intended to enhance the quality of English language provision at universities, for it constitutes a sector-wide monitoring and evaluation mechanism. The document states:

> The expectation of the project Steering Committee is that universities will consider the Principles as they would consider other guidelines on good practice. As part of AUQA quality audits universities can expect to be asked about the way they have addressed the Principles, just as they are likely to be asked by AUQA auditors about their application of a range of other external reference documents for the university sector (DEEWR 2009: 27).

The fact that NESB students struggle at all post-entry suggests that tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are not serving their purpose, for significant numbers of students who succeed in meeting universities' IELTS entry requirements often struggle, subsequently, to negotiate the demands of their studies. This may, in part, be down to the fact that although research suggests that IELTS is a quite good general predictor of academic success, and thus of 'readiness to enter' a degree program (see, for example, Rea-Dickens et al, 2007; Ingram and Bayliss, 2007; Paul 2007), receiving institutions sometimes place the IELTS bar too low (application) and/or do not fully understand what IELTS scores represent in real performance terms (interpretation). The are doubtless cases where universities set a low threshold in the interests of maintaining healthy student numbers; equally, however, there are instances where institutions are simply unaware that, for example, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) and its partner institutions state that an IELTS 6.0 requires additional English even for linguistically less demanding academic courses, and that linguistically more demanding courses with an entry requirement of IELTS 6.5 will also require further English study (IELTS, 2004). Alongside recognition of the need for such linguistic development, there also needs to be an appreciation of those affective factors pertaining to their social and cultural adjustment and their understanding of the education culture in which they are studying—factors which also have the potential to impact on their performance.

Whatever the reasons for the dissonance between pre-entry IELTS scores and post-entry performance, it is perhaps telling that, in tandem with Principle 1 of the GPPs ('Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies'), Principle 7 appears to acknowledge implicitly the inadequacy of English language screening measures. It reads: 'Students' English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment'. While the GPPs read very much as guidelines, initiatives are underway to translate them into 'standards', the implication being that universities are not so much being given *guidance* on how to think about and implement more effective English language support for their students, but rather something more akin to a requirement for compliance. As such, the highlighting of the diagnosis of students' English language needs within a document set to form the basis of future AQUA audits in respect of English, has doubtless given impetus to the notion of post-enrolment language assessment, as indeed has the impending new national regulatory and quality agency for higher education, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)

(DEEWR, 2010), which will constitute a framework for monitoring standards more broadly within higher education and other tertiary education institutions.

Whose English needs assessing?

Having established something of the rationale for PELA, the question arises as to which cohort(s) of students we should assess. Given the self-evident case for assessing NESB students' English language competence, this question might be re-formulated as: Should we *also* be assessing the English language competence of ESB (English speaking background) students? Government led initiatives to increase participation in higher education such that, by 2020, 20% of undergraduate enrolments should comprise students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley, 2008), certainly bolster the case for including this cohort in any assessment regime, for a proportion of students classified as 'low socio-economic status' (low SES) will have been educationally disadvantaged and are likely both to lack confidence in their language abilities, as these pertain to the higher education context, and to benefit from development in this area. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that even students from more privileged backgrounds, for a variety of reasons, do not always come equipped with the language skills they need for their studies or the workplace. The issue is sensitive, however: native speakers are, by definition, fully proficient and, understandably, would, not take kindly to being told otherwise. Nevertheless, their language may exhibit what can be characterised as dialectal features not in keeping with the expectations of academic and professional contexts, and as such require modification. Other than assessing these students post-enrolment, there is no way of knowing whether they need language support, for as native speakers and/or domestic students they are not required to demonstrate their competence in English as a condition of entry—something true also of domestic NESB students (Murray, 2010; Ransom, 2009). Given that self-nomination is unreliable and identification on the basis of foreign-sounding names would expose institutions to accusations of discrimination, universal assessment would appear to be indispensable if students potentially at risk from weak English are not to slip though the net. Finally, universal assessment circumvents the difficulties around stigmatising (by singling out) those for whom English is not a first language and of establishing valid equivalences between different tests and pathway programs, using as it does one test to assess all students, thereby creating an even playing field.

What needs to be assessed?

The notion of 'proficiency' referred to in the GPPs document is rather nebulous and needs unpacking if it is to have utility and inform a conceptualisation of English which can, in turn, inform practicable models of provision. Murray (ibid) has proposed such a conceptualisation, articulating a tripartite division of (interactive) competencies as follows:

Proficiency—a general communicative competence in language, enabling its user to express and understand meaning accurately, fluently, and appropriately according to context and comprising a set of generic skills and abilities (see, for example, Canale and Swain, 1980). Proficiency is reflected in learning that includes a focus on grammar, phonology, listening skills, vocabulary development, reading and writing skills, communication strategies, fluency, and the pragmatics of communication and associated concerns with politeness, implicature and inference. These represent an investment in language that can be 'cashed in' in any potential context of use and they are prerequisites to developing academic literacy and professional communication skills. Their importance to academic success is well documented (Johnson, 1988; Elder, 1993; Tonkin, 1995).

Academic literacy—conversancy in the specialised vocabularies, concepts, and knowledges associated with particular disciplines, and with their distinctive patterns of meaning-making activity (genres, rhetorical structures, argument formulations, narrative devices etc) and ways of contesting meaning (Rex & McEachen, 1999; Neumann, 2001). Different disciplines require students to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each, and to handle the social meanings and identities it evokes (Lea & Street, 1998; North, 2005).

Professional communication skills—a range of skills and abilities, including intercultural competence (Kramsch, 1993; Alptekin, 2002); interpersonal skills, including accommodation, politeness/face, turn-taking, awareness of self and other, and listening strategies (Goffman, 1967; Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor, 2001); conversancy in the discourses and behaviours associated with particular domains; leadership skills (Lumsden & Lumsden 1997); and non-verbal communication skills (Hybels & Weaver 2001).

There are sound arguments for embedding academic literacy and professional communication skills within the curriculum based on notions of relevance, authenticity and thus increased engagement, and the fact that few if any students will come equipped with the academic literacy practices their disciplines require. Most academic staff will have an implicit and procedural knowledge of such practices even if they require professional development to help them bring to consciousness and articulate those practices and hone the pedagogies necessary to ensuring that their students, in turn, develop a working understanding of them. If *all* students are to have the opportunity to acquire such an understanding via curriculum integration, then it is nonsensical to assess them post-entry. It follows that the only sensible focus of PELA is proficiency: a suitable assessment instrument will help identify those in greatest need in this regard and help ensure they get access to available support.

Assessment options

There are two ways of assessing students' language proficiency post-enrolment. The first is via a test, and Dunworth (2009) provides a useful account of several tests currently being considered by Australian universities. The adoption by any given university of a single, valid and reliable post-enrolment test has numerous advantages. It ensures uniform assessment, thus providing a reliable mechanism for streaming students for the purpose of subsequent provision; it can be relatively resource-light, given an online delivery and scoring platform; it presents the possibility of accumulating a bank of tests for student self-assessment; and it enables the administering university to determine its own cut-scores via a standard-setting exercise—ideally involving stakeholders from across faculties (Elder and Knoch 2009; Elder and von Randow, 2008). The logistics of administering the test, while challenging, are not insurmountable: in particular, if student numbers are such that there have to be multiple test sittings, security risks can be minimised by varying the topics of written tasks and by including task types such as c-test (text completion) and cloze elide that do not readily lend themselves to memorisation. Furthermore, different but equated test versions could be administered to different groups sitting the test at different times.

The second approach to assessment involves using an early piece of assessed coursework—assessed so as to provide some assurance that students are applying themselves fully to the task and thus providing an accurate picture of their proficiency. However, using different tasks in different courses as the basis for assessment raises validity issues around the streaming of students according to ability for the purpose of subsequent proficiency tuition, particularly if such tuition is delivered centrally. Furthermore, it is likely to be more resource-intensive than an electronically managed test, would delay provision until assignments were marked, and would be open to abuse unless completed under controlled conditions.

Screening versus diagnostic testing

Should an institution decide in favour of a post-enrolment test, it would need to be determined whether the test should serve solely as a screening tool through which to identify those students most at risk due to weak English, or also as a diagnostic tool that provides more specific information on their language strengths and weaknesses. While a diagnostic test has the advantage of helping teachers target their activities in subsequent proficiency classes and/or directing students to suitable workshops, online materials and other forms of language support, it is considerably more time-consuming and therefore less cost effective than screening, particularly if universal testing is implemented. Although online tests and electronic marking mechanisms can mitigate these things by identifying students' weakness and directing them to appropriate materials, such tests serve only as very blunt instruments. Arguably, a more practical option is to screen all students initially and then perform a diagnostic of students' language needs, either as a second phase of testing or (if provision is to take the form of proficiency classes) once students have enrolled in their classes.

Conclusion

If universities are serious about improving their English language provision for those students whose English language requires development, some form of PELA demands careful consideration for financial and resource constraints mean that most institutions can only afford to offer anything beyond online language development to those in greatest need; consequently, there needs to be some means of identifying this cohort.

The notion of universal assessment—and, in particular, testing—will doubtless be of concern to university management, where it is likely to be seen as a marketing liability. However, there is a potent counter-argument that universal assessment can represent a real asset if astutely packaged as added value and a demonstration of the university's desire to ensure its students' success. Furthermore, it is the only way to capture all potentially at-risk students in a non-discriminatory, non-stigmatising fashion by ensuring that domestic students and those who enter via various different pathways do not slip through the net.

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