

# Identifying students requiring English language support: What role can a PELA play?

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The number of higher education providers implementing a post-entry English Language Assessment (PELA) has increased exponentially in the past six years. This uptake has been driven largely by the “Good Practice Principles”, the TEQSA Act 2011, and TEQSA’s Quality Assessment on English Language Proficiency. Evidence suggests that at least 50% of Australian universities now offer some form of PELA, but few compel students to complete it. This paper discusses four years of learning that took place in one university, beginning with trialling a range of PELAs through to the endorsement of a short written task in all undergraduate courses. It addresses potential matters of contention, analyses why the initial university-wide roll-out was problematic and highlights the need to link PELA outcomes with effective language and academic skills support. The paper puts forward a case for the continued adoption of a PELA and suggests how this can be achieved in a cost-effective and sound pedagogical manner.

**Key Words:** PELA, TEQSA, English language proficiency.

## 1. Background

The number of higher education providers implementing a Post-entry English Language Assessment (PELA) has increased exponentially in the last six years. This uptake has been driven largely by rapid growth in the enrolment of international students, many of whom were perceived as having inadequate English language skills for effective participation in their courses. While universities reaped financial rewards, they also faced increasingly negative reportage (Birrell, 2006a; Birrell, 2006b; Elson-Green, 2007; Ewart, 2007) and the Australian government was pressed into action, in part to address reputational risk. This resulted in a number of commissioned reports: (i) “Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities” (AUQA, 2009) which outlined how universities should measure, develop and monitor English language skills and paved the way for future English language standards; (ii) *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. 103) that called for English language tuition to be integrated into the curriculum; (iii) *The impact of English language proficiency and workplace readiness on the employment outcomes of tertiary international students* (Arkoudis et al., 2009) that linked English language proficiency of international students and migrants to employment outcomes; and (iv) an updated *Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000* (DEEWR, 2010) which incorporated concerns about low entry standards.

Late in 2011, the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) Act 2011 and the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2011 were released. In terms of English Language Proficiency, the mostly forgotten group in previous reports was the growing number of domestic students with English as an additional language (EAL). In the TEQSA’s Threshold Standards, all students were included:

The higher education provider identifies and adequately meets the varying learning needs of all its students, including: ... ongoing academic language and learning support; ... [and] ensures that students who are enrolled are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in the course of study and achieve its expected learning outcomes (Course Accreditation Standards 3.2 & 5.6 in TEQSA, 2011).

Further highlighting TEQSA's stress on this key theme, its second Quality Assessment (QA) announced in March 2013, was English Language Proficiency (ELP). This wide ranging QA will take place in 2014 and will evaluate eight aspects of ELP. At the heart of requirements are plans, policies or strategies, elements that created some of the concerns noted earlier. Terms of Reference 4 and 6 are of significance for this paper:

The type and effectiveness of processes used after enrolment to ascertain that students are sufficiently competent in the English language in order to participate effectively in the course of study and achieve its expected learning outcomes.

Processes used to identify students requiring English language support [and] develop students' ELP and academic language proficiency ... following enrolment. (TEQSA, 2013)

The inclusion of a Post-entry English Language Assessment (PELA), linked with effective language and academic skills support for all students, has been viewed by some universities as addressing these key requirements (for an overview, see Dunworth, 2013). In fact, some universities state their rationale for introducing a PELA as "information gathering for quality assurance" or "recommendation from an external audit" (Dunworth, Drury, Kralik, & Moore, 2012).

PELAs were already in practice in about a third of Australian universities in 2009 (Dunworth, 2009, p. 9) and this rose to 65% by 2011 (Barthel, 2011). Adding a PELA to university processes and suggesting students complete the task can be a relatively easy undertaking, but these statistics may not fully capture what is taking place. In response to Barthel's summary, in April 2011 this author placed a question on an Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) forum regarding adoption and uptake of PELAs. Comments were received from 17 AALL members representing 14 higher education providers. Institutions cannot be named as confidentiality was promised, but the following themes emerged:

- all 14 institutions either had a PELA in place or were strongly considering adopting one;
- no institution had a policy requiring compulsion;
- in all but one case, the PELA sat outside the curriculum;
- in half the institutions, a small number of local students who had an English-speaking background stated that the PELA was irrelevant for them but should be compulsory for international students;
- completion statistics provided evidence that international students were loath to complete the PELA; and
- completion rates were low in all cases.

This paper overviews a process at one university in which a number of PELAs were trialled within a faculty in 2009 and 2011, culminating in full university implementation in 2012. It notes the significance of TEQSA's requirements and addresses potential matters of contention such as adoption of a PELA, compulsion and use of results. The paper further highlights problems with the initial university-wide operation and shows the positive outcomes that have been achieved.

## **2. Exploring the role a PELA can play: A three-year process**

### **2.1. Part 1: 2009: Initial trial**

Edith Cowan University (ECU) was established in 1991, one of many universities that emerged from its roots as a College of Advanced Education. ECU's 2012 Annual Report advised a student population of almost 24,000, of which about 4,000 were international students from over 90 countries. A large proportion of this international cohort was in the Faculty of Business and Law, particularly in accounting, economics and finance courses. Almost all had English as an additional language (EAL). Despite media concerns in 2008 and 2009 that a decline in international student numbers was imminent, the business faculty experienced strong growth as well as increased enrolment in domestic students who had EAL; 53% of its students in 2009 had EAL.

As this trend was unfolding, analysis of semester results revealed that students with EAL were among those most "at risk"; meaning they were disproportionately represented in those placed on probation, at risk or excluded from their studies. Faculty discussions centred on lecturers' concerns of perceived weaknesses in students' ELP. Early in 2009, the Dean of the faculty secured a substantial grant from the Vice-Chancellor to address this concern and the executive group opted to trial two tests: the computer-based ACER English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA) and a paper-based IELTS style test. These were chosen for no other reason than they were known to staff.

A project manager was employed to conduct the tests. The IELTS style test, prepared by a faculty-based academic who had taught English as a second language in Asia, was administered in a 2<sup>nd</sup> year core business unit in March 2009. The unit included a high number of EAL students as it was a core unit for articulation students who entered through a range of agreements. The test was contextualised and comprised three sections: description of a graph, a short essay, and a speaking and listening exercise. Marking was not moderated, although some training of markers assessing the oral component took place. ACER's ELSA could not initially be implemented as ECU's IT firewall would not allow it to be run and policy could not be changed to allow the trial. ACER sent a computer server to Perth in order for the trial to take place, a response that significantly delayed results, consequently undermining one of the advantages of ELSA's computer-generated marking.

The test adapted from IELTS was evaluated as relevant for the group (see Messick, 1989), but was costly to run due to the speaking/listening component. At this point, the inclusion of an oral component for future trials was ruled out due to the cost and time of implementation (see Bachman, 2009). In addition, discussions as to further use of tests along the lines of IELTS or TOEFL were overshadowed by debate within the university as to IELTS' predictive ability as an entry pathway (see, for example, Dooley & Oliver, 2002; for later comment, see O'Loughlin, 2011). At the time, there was little research regarding ELSA's validity for use in a university setting, but discussions with academic language and learning professionals from four universities who had also trialled it supported ECU's conclusions of it being too easy and lacking academic items to measure skills.

As a result of initial trials, the faculty had confirmation that a number of its students had problems with ELP, consequently placing the development of English language skills on the agenda. Some teaching staff argued that they were not trained to deal with ELP and many suggested entry pathways should be analysed. At the time, the University was completing a large-scale project that involved analysis of entry pathways and, while PELA results available at the time were of interest, they were not included. When that report was released in July 2009, it highlighted some potentially weak pathways. This gave momentum to further PELA trials as some viewed the task as a final "check". Neither test trialled was viewed as adequate for ECU's needs, but institutional leaders wanted to continue with trials. A decision was made to trial a more diagnostic task and a short writing task.

In July 2009, a group of volunteers from the same unit as earlier trials completed two more paper-based tests: a TOEFL Integrated Writing task (a reading taken from their textbook, short rebuttal lecture and comparative writing) and a short written task based on the PELA designed

by Alex Barthel at UTS (Barthel, 2009). The two paper-based tasks were assessed using TOEFL's Scoring Standards. Many students scored a 2 or 3 on the Integrated Writing (which in terms of ELP, represents significant difficulties or frequent errors) and marginally better on the simple writing task. At the same time, a further trial took place within the MBA course, a course that included a large number of EAL students. An online PELA was favoured by the leadership team at ECU, so this group trialled the University of Auckland's DELNA Screening, comprising vocabulary and speed-reading. Almost all the students who participated in DELNA Screening failed to reach the benchmark and would have been required to complete the DELNA Diagnosis. Discussions with the test administrator showed that students managed the tasks but were slow in their responses. The two components in DELNA Screening were not contextualised to business, but were described as "robust measures" (Elder & von Randow, 2008, p. 189) and the issue of the time prescribed for the tasks could be adjusted. While online options remained of interest to the university's leadership team, they were not further considered at the time as the failure rate of computers in the DELNA trial was 5% and sourcing computer rooms to implement the task in a secure environment was difficult.

The TOEFL Integrated Writing and the short written task were evaluated for further use. The integrated task was viewed as superior in terms of measuring a range of tasks, but regarded as difficult to implement due to the need for unit-specific preparation and delivery. The short written task, in which students were given 20 minutes to write about 150 words on a general business topic, was regarded as simple and efficient. Both tasks used TOEFL's scoring standards and results were compared. Students scored consistently lower (0.5 – 1.0) in the integrated task, but the results between the two tasks were consistent. In terms of validity (Messick, 1989; Shaw & Weir, 2007), the short written task measured what it was intended to measure, students were familiar with the type of task (Weir, 2005, p. 54), and it was viewed as fair to all students (Bachman, 2009, p. 31). As a result, the short written task was favoured.

Topics were contextualised loosely to business themes and the aim was to assess ELP rather than knowledge so no student would be disadvantaged. Topics were authentic or "real-world", addressing the call for content-relevance (see Bachman, 2002; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; 2010; Wiggins, 1993). Taking heed of Lee and Anderson's (2007, p. 312) findings that business students performed better when writing on a subject-specific topic, it was decided that future topics would be related more closely to first year themes studied in the Business Edge program. As a result of discussions with the test developer, Catherine Elder (personal communication, 2009; 2010), the topics would be extended to include the development of an argument. Extension of the topic rekindled discussions as to the time allowed for the task. Some academics suggested 15-20 minutes was too short a time in which to develop a topic. The various trials in 2009 included writing tasks that allowed 15, 20, 30 and 40 minutes and, with the exception of the 15 minute task, responses offered enough material to assess; that is, they were comparable. Knoch and Elder (2010) investigated the impact of shortening the time allowed to complete the DELA writing task – from 50 to 30 minutes – and found that while more proficient students benefitted from a greater time allowance, there was no significant difference between the groups.

Checking the validity of scoring (see Shaw & Weir, 2007; Weir, 2005) raised concerns about marking. In the initial IELTS style test, a meeting to discuss how to mark the speaking/listening component took place with the assessors; however, no other moderation took place. Only one assessor, a trained IELTS examiner, marked the written sections, but this was not moderated. The later trial established a different process. A number of markers from varied English language colleges were employed and each paper was marked by two assessors (see Johnson, Penny, Gordon, Shumate, & Fisher, 2009, p. 120). As each marker had extensive experience teaching EAL students and assessing IELTS examinations, the only training provided was based on the TOEFL Independent Writing Rubric. There was very little discrepancy between scores which showed the skill of the markers rather than efficacy of the training offered. Feedback was via the TOEFL rubric and markers were requested to circle issues on the rubric and annotate students' work. In a forum that followed, students indicated they valued this additional feedback. Bachman (2009, p. 26) asserts that tests will be supported if both test takers and users

perceive the task and capability being assessed as relevant. The feedback played a role in garnering support among students and was seen as important by discipline-based academics.

Cost was another factor considered. While the integrated task assessed a greater range of capabilities, it was judged as expensive and difficult to administer. On the other hand, the short written task, which gained comparable results, was regarded as simple to administer and financially viable at less than \$10 per student. Bachman (2009) stated that if a test is “too costly to administer and score, it will not get used” (p. 25). As ECU was trialling PELAs, so too was Neil Murray at the University of South Australia. In 2011, he also echoed the need for “careful consideration [of] financial and resource constraints” (Murray, 2011, p. 31).

The trials and subsequent evaluations led to the short written task being the favoured option. It met Bachman’s (2009) elements of “validity, usefulness and fairness” (p. 31). The following four factors were paramount in the choice of task:

1. The results were consistent with longer, more complex tests and similar feedback could be given to students.
2. Staff found it took limited class-time and was easy to implement.
3. Students perceived the task as relevant to their studies.
4. In addition to satisfying Bachman’s elements, it was the cheapest option, an important factor as the university leadership was open to the task being rolled out more widely.

Further discussions included objectives for implementing a PELA. Read (2012) maintained that “a PELA has a purpose which is distinct from that of either a proficiency or placement test” (p. 15). The PELA trials were initially used to gain evidence of students’ ELP, but the short written task being adopted was not diagnostic in nature. In the June trials, two students were regarded as extremely weak and their entry pathways were investigated, but it was not envisaged that the short written task would be used as a gatekeeper. A report tabled at a faculty executive meeting put forward recommendations that encompassed:

1. the inclusion of a PELA,
2. the employment of Learning Advisors with qualifications in teaching EAL within the faculty,
3. professional development for academic staff in effective teaching methodologies with EAL students,
4. the development of credit-bearing EAL units designed for faculty needs, and
5. analysis of how English language competence was assessed throughout the faculty.

The PELA formed one part of a whole of faculty approach, and all the recommendations above have progressed on both a faculty and university-wide level.

## **2.2. Part 2: 2010: Establishing adequate learning support**

Lecturers’ apprehensions were confirmed as the faculty had evidence of students requiring assistance with ELP. The faculty was keen to implement a PELA in 2010, but there was a major issue – limited support for students. Support for students was based primarily around a small group of learning advisors offering individual consultations and general workshops through a centralised learning centre (see Harris, 2010). Generic ESL units were also offered. Read (2008, p. 187) and Ransom (2009, p. A17) stressed the need for a range of options to sit alongside a PELA, including ESL units, workshops, adjunct programs, and discipline-specific tutorials. Dunworth (2009) shared fears expressed by her respondents; that a PELA would drain budgets linked to support services and PELAs were being introduced “without planning or being able to resource the next step” (p. A9). These concerns were shared with members of the faculty executive who supported the establishment of a faculty-based Academic Skills Centre. In March 2010, the centre was operational and, from the onset, learning advisors sought to work mainly within disciplines (see Harris & Ashton, 2011), a program that will be discussed later in the paper. An unexpected outcome was the subsequent decentralisation of learning support at ECU by the end of 2010, a significant factor as the PELA was implemented more widely. No PELAs were implemented during this period of change.

### 2.3. Part 3: 2010 – Implementing a PELA across the faculty

The next step was to trial a different process within the business faculty. While there was consensus as to the PELA – a short written task – there was no agreement as to the approach; that is, should it be run within a core unit, the approach trialled up until this point, or should it be implemented during the orientation period, an approach supported at that stage by some within the university leadership. Another trial was planned for 2011 and, while it would involve only the business faculty, it was conducted on behalf of the university as part of an ongoing undergraduate renewal project, “Curriculum 2012 and Beyond”.

All enrolling students received details of the PELA in their offer package. As students clicked through the various acceptances and requirements, they came across a “Writing Task”. A short letter implied it was a requirement despite no policy to support such a suggestion. Students were asked to sign up for a session that would take place on campus during Orientation Week. No online option was offered. They were informed they would receive feedback on their writing within a week of the session and that results would not appear on their transcript. Valid queries followed, as students asked about the need for such a task, compulsion, ECU policy and the effect on their grades. All who questioned the task were informed it was not compulsory.

The initial completion rate was low (30%), but reminders and additional sessions increased it to 44.4%. Very few international students participated initially, so a decision was made to specifically target them. By the end of week 12, a 50% completion rate was achieved, but only 41.6% of the international intake had completed the task (Table 1).

**Table 1.** FBL Trial: Completion rates of the PELA in semester 1, 2011.

<b>Students</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Domestic</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>International</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>New enrolments</b>	1139		812		327	
<b>Completed PELA</b>	574	50.4%	438	54%	136	41.6%
					(By week 5: 68 + Week 12: 68)	
<b>Refused to complete PELA</b>	48	4.2%	48			
<b>Received advice - PELA was not compulsory</b>	115	11%	115			

Students who participated were invited to give feedback. Acknowledging the biased sample, many were positive: “excellent idea”, “wanted to do this last year” and “good to know that ECU is helping students to improve their skills”. Feedback to students was limited. The TOEFL five-point scale was used and the general feedback within that marking scale was included in feedback. Students could pick up their paper which was lightly annotated, but less than 5% opted to do so.

The writing of 27 students was assessed as showing “limited development” and containing “numerous errors”. Six were from an English speaking background, two were domestic students with EAL, and 19 were international students, all of whom had EAL. Each student was asked to attend a short meeting with a designated learning advisor, but only 11 students took up the offer.

Once again, both the process and task were evaluated. By this stage, an English Language Development committee had been formed under the auspices of Curriculum 2012 and Beyond. The short written task, more fully trialled in this process, was once again viewed as valid and satisfying needs. The topics were based broadly on business themes, but not contextualised to the Business Edge program due to the timing and placement of the task. They still allowed development of an argument and were content relevant. Twenty minutes was given for the task and analysis of papers showed that to be sufficient to assess each student’s writing. Papers were

marked by IELTS examiners and results moderated. There was little differentiation in marking. This evaluation led to the English Language Development Committee formally adopting the short written task as ECU's PELA. Since that time, the enterprise became known as "the PELA" and the tool has been called a "Writing Task".

There were two interrelated concerns with outcomes. One was the lack of completion by those perceived as most in need of ELP support – students who entered via alternative pathways. This was in keeping with feedback from AALL members in 2011. The second concern was low uptake to access the range of support measures. As a result, two processes were discussed. The first process was the inclusion of the PELA in core units and work towards its integration into the formal curriculum. Students would complete the task in class and have papers returned to them within two weeks. The provision of learning support would be directly linked to the PELA through embedding of skills in class, adjunct workshops and more general workshops. The second process was for courses to complete the PELA in Orientation Week. Learning support would be in place in the form of workshops contextualised to the faculty, schools and/or courses. The favoured approach was completion in class and this was formally adopted.

Leadership was critical in reaching this point. In analysing DELNA trials, Read (2008) noted central funding and a "direct management line to the Office of Deputy Vice-Chancellor" as integral to its success (p. 189). On the other hand, Ransom (2009) noted a lack of "clear leadership" making implementation of DELA "more difficult than it should have been" at the University of Melbourne (p. A23). Given that funding for the business faculty's trials came from the Vice Chancellor, there was strong commitment from senior leadership. There was support from coordinators in the business faculty, but wider support was limited to two coordinators from a separate faculty who had been involved in 2011 at their request. Outside of these groups, the PELA was largely unknown.

### **3. Implementing a PELA across the university**

The decisions as to the task and process were made by mid-2011 and formed part of broader ELP discussions within the Curriculum 2012 and Beyond project. Reports for that project were tabled at the university's Curriculum Teaching and Learning Committee late in the year and, at that meeting, the recommendation to implement a PELA in all undergraduate courses, linked to effective learning support, was approved. A new PELA team comprising a PELA Coordinator (HEW8; full-time) and an Administration Officer (HEW4, 0.6) was put in place, but not until mid-February. Both were new to the university. Course coordinators were informed, late in February, about the requirement to include the PELA in a unit, but offered little or no background about the task. Some claimed that ELP was not a concern while others ignored the email. Eventually, units were nominated, but the process was flawed. Students were asked to complete a "Writing Task" in class in weeks 1, 2 or 3, but received few, if any, details as to objectives or expected outcomes. Feedback was almost non-existent. Most received a letter via email up to six weeks later giving them a score of 1, 2 or 3 and a short statement explaining the result of "the PELA", a title not used when students completed the task. No other feedback was given. No results were sent to staff and there was no follow up. In addition, with a few exceptions where good practice was followed, no support was linked to the implementation of the PELA.

A second process ran parallel in two faculties – in business and at ECU's regional campus. In the business faculty, the task was conducted in the 1<sup>st</sup> year Business Edge unit and in two other core units. It was also run in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year Business Edge (BE) unit to encompass articulation students. Students completed the short written task, addressing a question contextualised to the unit, in weeks 1 or 2, and received their papers and results the following week. In the 1<sup>st</sup> year BE unit, learning support was embedded within the unit. In another unit, students were invited to participate in adjunct workshops. In the third unit, students were invited to attend academic skills workshops conducted within the faculty. The 2<sup>nd</sup> BE class also received targeted learning support. At the regional campus, the PELA was completed in an academic skills unit and managed by a learning advisor/sessional academic who coordinated the unit. The task was run

in week 1 and papers were returned the following week. Learning support was linked to the main errors in papers.

The parallel processes highlighted strengths and weaknesses and it was clear there were significant issues. Evaluation was delayed, but reasons for this cannot be discussed. Suffice to say that four weeks prior to the start of second semester, staff changes were made. The academic who had managed the business faculty's trials from 2009-2011 was asked to manage the PELA process and given a time allowance of 0.5. The administrative officer remained at 0.6, but increased hours during the PELA process. Four weeks allowed little time to collaborate with disengaged academics and turn around student dissatisfaction. The following key factors, however, were identified and addressed for future implementation:

1. The writing task: time allowed for the task and topic selection
2. Feedback
3. Ownership
4. Provision of learning support

#### **4. The Writing Task**

Evaluation revealed that writing task instructions confirmed in 2011 were not followed. Classes were given only 15 minutes writing time in which to complete the task and this included filling in personal details. Students were asked to write 100 words and two paragraphs on a generic topic. Some complained about the lack of context and while fewer than 10 students responded nonsensically or impolitely, the topic, as well as lack of time, impeded development of an argument. The feedback sheet, based on the TOEFL Independent Writing Task, had been simplified to three bands as per Barthel's (2009) suggestions, but the accompanying descriptors offered no feedback on students' ELP. A new answer template with updated instructions was produced to ensure the task was conducted properly. Topic selection was more difficult as this required staff buy-in and was included in a challenging feedback strategy.

#### **5. A new feedback strategy**

The new feedback strategy included consultation with course coordinators, a detailed "Feedback Sheet" for students, summaries of common errors which would inform learning support, a new process in assessing papers, and timely feedback to all stakeholders. Hirsch (2007, p. 207) **has** asserted that a central question is how results are utilised. In this case, they were not used in a productive manner. Students received an email late in the semester and staff received no feedback. The email sent to students lacked context and detail. Six students received two conflicting emails as they were enrolled in a double major and completed the task twice. In one unit they were assessed as not requiring assistance and, in the other, they were graded as being weak. Papers were assessed by external markers but there was no moderation. In the parallel process, the PELA was well received by those involved. Dissemination of results helped to raise faculty awareness of ELP requirements and effective learning support was in place in all but one unit. Students saw value in the task because they were given reasonable feedback, while staff who also received results encouraged their classes to participate in the range of options offered. In this process, there was good buy-in from staff and students.

Murray (2010) cautioned that "careful lobbying" and a "clear roll-out strategy" were "key ingredients for getting buy-in from stakeholders across the university" (p. 356). Course coordinators were vital stakeholders but, with the exceptions noted earlier, were almost completely overlooked. They were informed of the requirement to include the PELA in their unit. Most had no idea what it was and why it was being implemented. They were offered little, if any, information. Support for the PELA was largely top-down and offered those involved in the realisation of the task little or no sense of ownership. Given the limited timeframe to plan the next roll-out and the need to ensure academic staff were aware of changes to the task, a two-page "Information Sheet" was sent to all coordinators involved in implementing the PELA. It included a brief overview of TEQSA's requirements, a description of the PELA and suggested topics, benefits for students, how to run the task, feedback that would be given to students and



coordinators and the types of learning support available. The most tangible outcomes – PELA results for their unit and a summary of common errors – were promised for the Monday following completion of the task.

Feedback was pinpointed as critical in gaining support, so both the rapid turnaround of papers and ensuring all stakeholders were informed of results were crucial. Arkoudis and Tran (2010, p. 176) stress the importance of good feedback even when a student is achieving good grades. Knoch (2012) indicated that a “detailed feedback profile is ... crucial to the success of such a test” (p. 32; see also p. 44). In an earlier paper, Knoch (2008, p. 62) made an interesting point related to markers: when assessing English for academic purposes, markers changed their “rating behaviour” when using a more detailed scale. The strategy was to include everyone involved – students, unit coordinators, learning advisors, Associate Deans Teaching and Learning, the DVC T&L, markers and the two staff members employed to manage and administer the PELA. The detailed one-page feedback sheet formed the backbone of the strategy. In semester 2 2012, it contained results based on a simple three point scale with associated recommended actions, as well as ten grammatical categories. In second semester 2013, the latter was extended to 15 categories and three ELP descriptors were added (see Appendix 2). This feedback sheet, currently in use, offers students a snapshot of their ELP and is returned with their paper the week following completion of the PELA. While that commitment has proven challenging, it has been central to gaining support from two key stakeholders – coordinators and students.

In July 2012, a team of markers was hastily recruited and assessment of papers took place on-campus from Wednesday – Saturday during the three weeks in which the PELA was run. In order to improve “score accuracy”, Johnson et al.’s (2009, p. 120) approach was followed. Training sessions were run for all markers which covered the new feedback sheet, the type of comments that could be added to papers, and the importance of positive and extensive feedback. Twenty papers were used to establish benchmarks for what constituted a result of 1, 2 and 3. Once assessment started, a small team of moderators monitored papers and, if necessary, sat with markers whose results were not in keeping with the standard. Greenberg’s (1992) comment that “there is no ‘right’ or ‘true’ judgment of a person’s writing ability” (p. 18) is true, so when there were questions in relation to a paper that did not fit the norm, it was discussed as a group. Knoch’s (2008, p. 62) earlier comment that markers changed their assessment practices when using a more detailed scale was evidenced and their feedback informed improvements to the original Feedback Sheet.

The feedback strategy included collating markers’ responses to the grammatical categories. This information, called a “Summary of Common Errors”, was forwarded to the relevant learning advisors, coordinators, Associate Deans Teaching and Learning and institutional leaders. Datasets were generated at course, school, faculty and whole of university levels. The latter informed planning for university-wide ELP workshops that ran from weeks 5 – 10.

Since semester 2 2012, feedback has formed a major part of PELA Reports that are produced each semester and tabled at the ELP Committee and the Curriculum Teaching and Learning Committee. These reports include analysis of results against a range of datasets including basis of admission, language spoken at home, year of arrival and other measures.

## **6. Ownership**

A new process, with feedback at its core, was in place by the time the PELA ran in semester 2 2012 (see Appendix 1). Student feedback (via learning advisors, unit coordinators and direct feedback) was positive about the feedback sheet and rapid turnaround of results, but the sample was biased as they proffered comments. Staff feedback (via a survey sent to all staff involved) was overwhelmingly positive. The survey was sent to 34 coordinators and 16 responded. Fifteen of the 16 respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the PELA process was satisfactory; that the Information Sheet was useful; that they could indicate to students and other staff why the PELA was being implemented; and that the feedback was useful. Less than 50% of the coordinators responded, but as very little consultation had taken place given the tight timeframe, this was not

unexpected. The overall completion rate was 60%, but students who completed the task in semester 1 were exempt, skewing the data. Changes to analysis of results had led to accurate statistics in 2013.

In semester 1 2013, the completion rate increased to 85%. The major reason for the increased uptake was staff buy-in, largely created through consultations with staff involved in implementing the PELA. In the first instance, consultations took place with Associate Deans Teaching and Learning to ensure correct academic leaders were engaged. Meetings then took place with Heads of School, Program Directors and/or coordinators. Face to face contact allowed discussion of a range of issues and, by semester 1 2013, there was significant support from staff. Three courses have since integrated the task into the unit's initial assessment task and four postgraduate course coordinators requested a PELA be run with their units. The completion rate can also be attributed to increased student buy-in, largely resulting from the feedback and embedded learning support.

The PELA was also trialled with off-campus students in semester 1 2013. The task was added to their Blackboard site and is now part of core business. Completion rates have been around 50% so far. Highlighting the importance of staff support, two unit coordinators secured 100% and 93% completion rates in their units, a statistic that includes both on- and off-campus cohorts. Their approaches have been showcased for others to follow.

## 7. Provision of learning support

In semester 1 2012, implementing a PELA and offering little feedback *and* limited support was poor practice. Linking effective language and/or academic skills support was [and is] crucial. In the business faculty, the provision of learning support within the three 1<sup>st</sup> year units in which a PELA was implemented was varied as a result of coordinators' requests. This allowed further evaluation. In the largest unit (433 enrolled), language and academic skills were embedded within tutorial sessions three times throughout the semester, an approach proven to be successful (see Dale, Cable, & Day, 2006; Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Hamil Mead, 2009; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Jacobs, 2007; Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010). Using the just-in-time concept, learning advisors embedded skills linked to the assessment tasks in the weeks prior to the due date. Students were also offered unit-specific Assignment Labs (A-labs) where the tasks were further explored through group and individual assistance. Further individual assistance was offered to students who had attended an A-Lab. 75% of students noted as weakest in the PELA attended at least one A-Lab, and all had attended at least one class in which skills were embedded. The unit coordinator reported improved results in the targeted assignment and has since added a re-submit option that incorporates the levels of support. A second unit (185 enrolled) offered adjunct workshops linked to the initial assessment task. In 2011, these had attracted only 20% of the cohort, but lecturing staff stressed the importance of the workshops and also participated. Around 60% of enrolled students attended, but students assessed as weakest in the PELA were not present. When results were returned to students enrolled in the third unit (80 enrolled), they were invited to attend academic skills workshops run within the faculty. Only two students from this unit attended and both were competent writers.

At the regional campus, the PELA was run in a credit-bearing unit that covered academic skills. Workshops were offered each week and data confirmed an increase in numbers following the return of results. Individual consultations were also well supported.

At ECU, the PELA process is twofold as implementation of the writing task is linked to effective learning support. Once units were in place in semester 2 2012, learning advisors were provided with a list and were encouraged to work with coordinators to ensure adequate provision of learning support. This resulted in over 75% of units receiving embedded or adjunct support. Later in the semester, they were invited to participate in professional development that explored various ways of providing effective support (see Appendix 3). Currently, students receive either embedded support or adjunct workshops in 80% of "PELA units" and all students, regardless of year level, are invited to participate in faculty or school-based workshops and

assignment labs. In addition, ELP workshops are run on campus and available to all students through a YouTube channel. Individual consultations take place when time allows.

## 8. Conclusion

The Australian government, through its Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, is taking seriously the English language proficiency of higher education students. A quality assessment will examine each university's policies and strategies related to ELP. ECU adopted a university-wide PELA with the dual aims of identifying, early in their studies, students who may require support with ELP, and providing effective language and academic support where it is most needed (see TEQSA, 2013). Outcomes were evaluated following each implementation and issues were addressed. The current process has been conducted for three semesters and is now core business. It is "owned" by those who are involved and, in many ways, it could be described as top-down *and* bottom-up. The PELA is regarded by stakeholders as an important component of ECU's relevant and engaged curriculum. There are four main elements in terms of university-wide impact of the PELA (see Bachman & Palmer, 1996): early ELP feedback to stakeholders, the provision of effective learning support, generating understanding of students' ELP requirements, and strengthening of policy related to ELP strategies and processes.

The feedback strategy played a role in garnering and maintaining support. In a survey of all stakeholders (with the exception of students) following the PELA implementation in semester 2 2012, staff were overwhelmingly supportive of conducting the PELA in future and listed feedback as the best aspect. Students were invited to give feedback in four large core units in semester 1 2013, and 95% noted the feedback as positive and 78% viewed the task as relevant. In semester 2 2013, over 50 students who missed the task contacted the PELA manager requesting permission to complete the task. This is a strong turnaround within a year.

The provision of effective learning support has impacted students and staff in all faculties. This includes integrating language and/or academic skills within units, an undertaking that includes considerable engagement with teaching staff; adjunct workshops targeting specific assessment tasks within units; assignment labs where students can work on tasks together and access support from a learning advisor; general workshops contextualised to faculty or school level; ELP workshops; and individual consultations. This is vastly different from, and a significant improvement on, what was available when the initial trials were conducted in 2009 (for further details, see Harris, 2010; Harris & Ashton, 2011).

The main impact, arguably, has been generating understanding of the ELP needs of ECU's diverse student population. This knowledge has driven further initiatives. Eight years of using the DELNA at the University of Auckland created awareness of the academic language needs of its first year students (von Randow, 2010, p. 175). Working in the same university, Read (2012, p. 16) noted a positive impact on student learning. Ransom (2009) made a similar observation at the University of Melbourne, calling the increased understanding of language issues among staff and some students "consciousness raising" (p. A20). The same outcomes have been achieved at ECU. Coordinators have been proactive in the decision to extend PELA implementation to postgraduate courses in 2014. Articulation students are targeted through 2<sup>nd</sup> year units, also at coordinators' requests.

Analysis of PELA outcomes informed the need for consistent assessment of ELP and the development of students' ELP throughout their studies. A section entitled "English Language Proficiency and Development" was drafted in 2012 and endorsed as part of ECU's Course and Unit Planning and Development Policy in mid-2013. The policy closely mirrors TEQSA's Terms of Reference in the ELP QA, despite its preparation predating the QA. This QA, in turn, has added impetus to the process that will embed and develop ELP within ECU's curriculum.

English language proficiency at ECU is viewed more holistically as a result of the latest strategies, adding prominence to a recommendation that has appeared in every PELA report since 2009: the incorporation of a low-stakes integrated or independent writing task that is linked to an assessment task early in a 1<sup>st</sup> year core unit. Ideally, that unit would be a contextualised communications skills unit in which language and academic skills support is

integrated. This would achieve a seamless and sustainable PELA and, while it has been adopted within three courses, it remains a work in progress.

## **Appendix 1. PELA process**

1. **Task:** The PELA is a short written task. It is 150 words and is included in a core unit in all undergraduate courses (and postgraduate coursework courses from 2014). Answer sheets, headed 'Writing Task' and containing simple instructions, are provided to coordinators a week prior to implementation.
2. **Designated units:** Between semesters, meetings take place with coordinators to discuss and agree upon a designated 1<sup>st</sup> year core unit in which a PELA is conducted each time it is timetabled. Where there is no staff change, these meetings decrease as units are in place.
3. **Articulation students:** Where necessary, discussions take place with coordinators of 2<sup>nd</sup> year core units that include articulation students. These are included in the PELA process.
4. **Students:** A PowerPoint® slide that explains the task to students is sent to coordinators who may choose to personalise the slide. This ensures all students receive similar advice.
5. **Conducting the PELA in units:** Coordinators and lecturers run the PELA in weeks 1, 2 or 3 of the semester. Papers are marked within days and returned to coordinators the following Monday. Twenty percent of papers are moderated to ensure quality control.
6. **Feedback:** Coordinators and lecturers return papers with feedback to students in class. Students receive their marked paper, the Feedback Sheet (see Appendix 2), a letter outlining the task and a flyer advertising their faculty's support options. Off-campus students receive the same amount of feedback, but complete the task and receive feedback electronically.
7. **On the Monday after completion of the task,** results are sent to the DVC Teaching, Learning and International, the relevant Associate Dean Teaching and Learning, and relevant coordinators.
8. **Feedback sheets are collated for each unit and a Summary of Common Errors is sent to the relevant Associate Dean Teaching and Learning, coordinators and learning advisors.**
9. **Learning Advisors work closely with unit coordinators of 'PELA' units. Evaluation and professional development takes place each year in November. In units with high numbers of students with EAL, integrated or adjunct workshops are provided. In others, it may be adjunct or assignment labs linked to assessment tasks.**
10. **Provision of language and academic skills support: Learning Advisors provide integrated support or adjunct workshops (targeting assessment tasks) in up to 80% of the 'PELA' units. Faculty-based workshops are run by all faculties, as are Assignment Labs.**
11. **ELP workshops are offered to on- and off-campus students. The workshops are also available via YouTube.**
12. **Report:** A full report is compiled by mid-semester and tabled through the ELP and Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Committee.

## Appendix 2. Feedback Sheet

### FEEDBACK KEY (with examples only) – Sections where you need help:

<b>Punctuation</b> (comma, full stop, capitals)	<b>Spelling</b>	<b>Apostrophe</b> (missing, incorrect use, it's/its)	<b>Paragraphs</b> (no paragraphs, cohesion, transition [links] )	<b>Informal Language</b> (isn't [is not], & [and])
<b>Noun/verb Agreement</b> (he were [was], they is [are])	<b>Tenses</b> (walk, walked, have walked, have been walking)	<b>Modals</b> (can, could, may might)	<b>Word form</b> (plural, noun or verb form, -ing form)	<b>Word choice</b> (idioms, slang, does not suit the sentence)
<b>Sentence Structure</b> (incomplete, run on, word order)	<b>Sentence Complexity</b> (simple, rambling)	<b>Conjunctions</b> (and, but, yet, so, because, although)	<b>Prepositions</b> (in, at, on, by, from)	<b>Articles</b> (a, an, the)

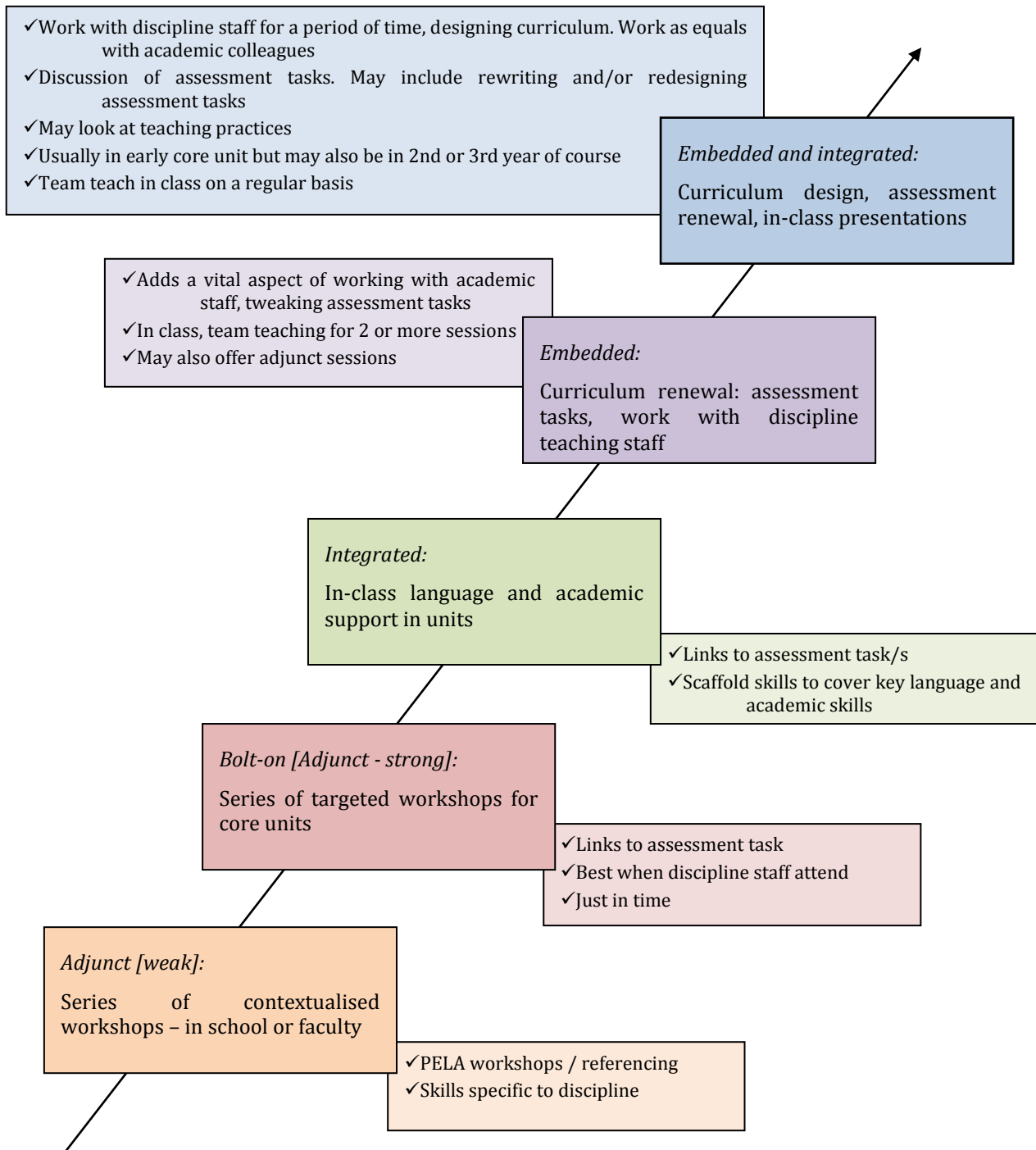
### English Language Proficiency Description

Focus on the topic	Content	Development of topic
<input type="checkbox"/> Strong focus on the topic	<input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate and relevant	<input type="checkbox"/> Clear and complex sentences used appropriately
<input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory focus on the topic	<input type="checkbox"/> Mostly relevant but could be further developed	<input type="checkbox"/> Logical and sustained connections throughout essay
<input type="checkbox"/> Poor focus on the topic	<input type="checkbox"/> Irrelevant material included	<input type="checkbox"/> Sentences lack complexity.
		<input type="checkbox"/> Ideas are disorganised and/or weakly connected across paragraphs.
		<input type="checkbox"/> Overly simple sentences that contain inaccuracies.
		<input type="checkbox"/> Uses language that impedes meaning.

### Based on the feedback, the following actions are recommended:

<b>1</b>	<b>No English language support required</b>	You have applied and demonstrated your knowledge of writing skills consistently, cohesively and effectively.
<b>2</b>	<b>May require English language support</b>	Speak with your Faculty Learning Advisor to find out what English language support is available this semester.
<b>3</b>	<b>English language support strongly recommended</b>	Early help can make your time at University much easier. Speak to your Faculty Learning Advisor to find out what English language support is available and how you can work together to increase your skills.
<b>3</b>	<b>Unable to mark</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Limited sample <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to read writing

### Appendix 3. Provision of Language and Academic Skills Support (Handout)



**Figure 1.** Provision of Language and Academic Skills Support (Handout): based on Harris and Ashton’s (2011) adaptation of approaches to integration and embedding of language and academic skills within the faculty (in Jones, Bonanno & Scouller, 2001).

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