

Implementing the post-entry English language assessment policy at the University of Melbourne: Rationale, processes, and outcomes

Laurie Ransom

Academic Skills Unit, University of Melbourne, Parkville Victoria 3010, Australia

Email: lransom@unimelb.edu.au

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In recognition of the impact English language has on academic outcome, the University of Melbourne mandated a post-entry language assessment for commencing undergraduate students, both native and non-native, in 2009. Students with less than 7 IELTS, 30 VCE English or 35 VCE ESL or equivalent are required to sit the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) and take up language support if they perform below a specified threshold on DELA. This paper offers an overview of the new policy and its rationale, summarizes the results and gives examples of the range of English language programs available to students. In addition, it outlines the strategies used to communicate the policy to both University staff as well as future students, and describes the hurdles experienced, in particular the issue of compliance. The introduction of the DELA was successful as measured by participation – up by 50% over the previous year in which it was voluntary – and also by increased awareness and responsiveness to the issue of language proficiency and its relationship to academic outcome. However, there were varying degrees of understanding of, and in some cases resistance to, the new policy, in addition to an uneven application across faculties. This paper aims to provide, for universities considering the introduction of a post-entry language test, some useful insights into the process, its potential pitfalls and benefits.

Key Words: language assessment; English language competence.

1. Introduction

The growing interest in post-entry English language assessment across the Australian higher education sector has arisen over many years' debate about and documentation of the challenges English as an additional language (EAL) students face academically, culturally and socially. These challenges, according to the widely-publicised Birrell report (2006), follow students into the employment sector, with disturbing consequences. The language competencies of international graduates of Australian universities have been shown to adversely affect employment outcomes, with many students being underemployed relative to their degree.

However, language proficiency, strictly speaking, has not been the only concern academics and support staff at our universities have expressed. Many also describe what they consider to be the lack of academic readiness exhibited by English-speaking background (ESB) students, particularly in terms of their writing skills, and the impact on attrition and retention rates. Most, if not all, universities offer a suite of programs and services to facilitate the transition into tertiary study, with some being compulsory, such as the information literacy prerequisites at the Universities of Adelaide and Wollongong (Starfield, Trahn, & Scoufis, 2008). Some universities

have also introduced faculty or departmental-based assessments to determine their students' level of preparedness for study, such as the MASUS at the Universities of Sydney and New South Wales.

In a recent study identifying the use of post-entry language assessment in 38 Australian institutions, Dunworth (2009) reported that more than 40% of the surveyed universities administered such a test, with another 12 universities proposing their introduction. Although many respondents had reservations about post-entry testing, all held a largely positive view for two main reasons. First was the ability to diagnose the language needs of students and thus intervene. Second was the capacity for students to understand and take responsibility for these needs. Both of these objectives have been articulated in the recently released *Good practice principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities* (DEEWR, 2009), which affirms the relationship between early identification and the student response. At the University of Auckland, where language testing was introduced in 2002 (Read, 2008), this concept of responsibility also included that of the institution, which "shares with students a joint responsibility to address academic language needs" (p. 182). Similar to the principles outlined by DEEWR, Auckland perceived the use of language assessment favourably, "as a positive commitment by the institution to enhancing the educational opportunities of the whole student body" (p. 182).

This paper will present the University of Melbourne's (UoM) rationale for introducing compulsory post-entry language testing, and outline the range of language enrichment programs available to support identified students. It will describe how the University presented the new policy to stakeholders, both internal and external, and summarise initial test results from semester 1 2009. The implementation process was not without its challenges, and this paper will focus on three areas: coordination, communication and compliance, all significantly hindered by the dramatic re-conceptualisation of the undergraduate curriculum and university-wide services known as the "Melbourne Model"¹. It will be shown that the policy was successful in terms of participation and impact. However, it will suggest that stakeholder consultation, coordination and communication are key areas that institutions considering the introduction of post-entry testing may wish to take into account. Additionally, this paper will suggest that research into the reasons for cases of non-compliance within one or more groups of stakeholders will need to occur if the UoM is going to achieve its goal of supporting all students to develop their academic language skills.

2. University of Melbourne context

The UoM, similar to other Australian institutions of higher learning, has experienced a growth in both international student admissions, as well as an increased focus on improving access to underrepresented groups. The current international student population at the University is 28% (University of Melbourne Finance and Planning Office, 2008) – arguably the largest such on-campus population in the world (Crooks, 2008); access targets, including students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, are set to increase by 10% by 2010 (currently around 8.67%). These trends have meant that a number of first year students, both international and local, may enter the University unprepared for the demands of their course, affecting their levels of engagement, as well as retention and completion rates.

Anecdotal information from academics and learning support staff suggest a lack of English language skills as undermining student performance for both international and local students. These perceptions have been corroborated by students in the *Survey of final year international students on their experience of the University of Melbourne* (2005), where 20-30% reported that their language skills significantly impacted on their ability to perform well academically and interact socially: "A lack of fluency in English not only affected students' understanding of academic content, but also had spin-off effects into other areas of their lives" (p. 5). In a UoM

¹ For more information go to http://www.provost.unimelb.edu.au/melbourne_model.

study on the perceptions and expectations of international EAL students, Ransom, Larcombe, and Baik (2005) showed that 60% of respondents recognised that they would be disadvantaged because of their limited language proficiency. International students continue to use the services of the Academic Skills Unit (ASU) disproportionately more than the rest of the student population – 49% compared to 28% in 2008; however, it is important to recognise that it is our *local* students who occupy the remaining 51% of service time (ASU 2008 statistics). As Larcombe and Malkin (2008) advise, we should avoid “the tendency to consider ‘international’ or overseas fee-paying students as the only cohort in need of, or likely to benefit from, English language development and academic writing programs” (p. 320). The introduction of screening tests in first year undergraduate Law at the UoM showed that nearly 50% of students identified for language and academic skills support were domestic. Similarly designed screening tests in three other faculties at the UoM also identified local ESB students in need of academic literacy development.

2.1. Diagnostic English language assessment

Developed by the UoM’s Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC), the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) was conducted upon university entry from 1999 to 2008 on a voluntary basis. DELA is a timed test (1 hour and 45 minutes) and is comprised of three subtests: reading, writing and listening. It is designed to test the academic language skills needed for university-level study. The 45-minute reading subtest includes two reading passages totalling 1,500 words. Question types include true/false, information transfer, cloze, short answer, summarising, multiple choice and matching ideas. The 30-minute writing subtest is a 300-word argumentative essay based on information provided, to which students can expand with their own thoughts and opinions. The essay is assessed on vocabulary and grammar; coherence and cohesion; and content. The 30-minute listening subtest employs a short lecture from which students must recall main and supporting ideas in the form of short answers and the completion of a diagram. The reliability and validity of DELA, although important, fall outside the scope of this paper.

In 2003, after a review of diagnostic testing practices at the University, it was further recommended that all undergraduates at risk because of language difficulties undertake the DELA or other form of diagnostic assessment as early as possible so that referral to appropriate language enrichment programs could occur. It was believed that a not insignificant number of international students would benefit from early intervention, resulting in “better outcomes for the student and [enabling] them to achieve their potential with less anxiety” (Martin, McPhee, Rickards, & Skene, 2003, p. 5). International students were thus referred to sit DELA when their language study scores (IELTS or equivalent) fell below a certain threshold²; many students not in this category self-selected and indeed were encouraged to take the test. In 2004, local EAL students were also invited to take up DELA in a response to data suggesting that this cohort were more at risk than international EAL students. However, the voluntary nature of DELA has meant that many students targeted to sit the diagnostic test did not, and in fact, participation rates in DELA, after a peak in 2006, dropped by almost 20% in the subsequent two years.

2.2. Rationale

In preparation for the introduction of the Melbourne Model, which restructured the undergraduate curriculum from over 60 degrees to six generalist (New Generation) degrees, the UoM undertook to review the English language entry requirements and support programs in

² Less than 7 IELTS, 35 VCE ESL, 85 Trinity College Foundation Studies EAP score, or 2 years study in an English as medium of instruction institution. Here, VCE refers to the Victorian Certificate of Education, which recognises the successful completion of secondary education in the state of Victoria, Australia. *VCE ESL* refers to the test designed for non-native English speakers who have been in Australia under 7 years and whose previous instruction was in a language other than English, as opposed to *VCE English* which refers to the standard test of English that most Victorian students take.

2006-07. Although many students enter the UoM with the requisite language skills (a minimum of 6.5 IELTS, 25 VCE English and 30 VCE ESL), evidence had suggested that their command of academic English may in some cases be insufficient to allow them to engage effectively with their studies, and that this may impact both on the quality of their study experience and also on their academic outcome throughout the degree program. The Task Force on English Language Bridging and Support Programs (Task Force) was thus established and included representatives from Academic Board, the School of Languages and Linguistics (SLL), the Graduate School of Education, the ASU, Hawthorn English Language Centre, and the Chancellery. The Task Force's overarching objective was aspirational: that "a high level of competence in communication is among the set of qualities that we desire for our graduates" (*Application of the proposed framework*, 2007, p. 1). Underpinning this aspiration were the goals of enhancing academic outcomes "by recognising the critical role that English language proficiency plays in the realisation of academic potential" and of assuring "credible levels of English proficiency" (p. 2) for graduates of the New Generation degrees.

The Task Force recommendations, deliberated amongst members over one and a half years, were approved by Academic Board in 2007. The Board stipulated that from 2009, all commencing undergraduate students³ with an IELTS of less than 7, VCE English or English Literature less than 30, VCE ESL less than 35 or equivalent must undertake an additional post-entry diagnostic language assessment. Students who fall below a certain threshold on the assessment must undertake an academic literacy development program. Upon advice from the LTRC, an executive decision has been made that students who achieve an overall score of 3.3 or less (out of 6) are required to take up language support. Those with an overall score of 3.4 to 4 are recommended for further language development. Those with an overall score greater than 4 are deemed to have sufficient academic English. Based on the Task Force's recommendations, faculties were given the authority to determine the nature of English language support for their students, in particular how the support could "align with their degree structure, curriculum design and approaches to teaching and learning" (*Application of the proposed framework*, 2007, p. 11) without incurring additional cost or time to the student.

Contrary to the general principle of "personal choice" initially advocated at the University of Auckland (Read, 2008), which shares a history of post-entry language assessment in the form of the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA), the Task Force recommended compulsory as opposed to voluntary testing. The reason for this was two fold: the low take up rate of DELA in its voluntary form, and the belief that mandatory testing would ensure targeted students were channelled into appropriate academic language programs. Despite funding being available to assess 1200 students, this figure was never attained, with the largest participation rate at 66% (of the 1200 places allocated under the funding model) in 2006. Under the previous voluntary testing regime, many students avoided DELA, despite a faculty recommendation that they attend. Consequently, intervention did not occur for targeted linguistically at risk students. Similarly, participation rates in the DELNA screening (the first part of a two-tiered testing system) at Auckland University were also low in the beginning, but increased to around 70% in 2007 when the screening "officially became a requirement for almost all first-year students, regardless of their language background" (Read, 2008, p. 186).

The Task Force also felt such a policy should be "inclusive". It should target *all* students who might potentially be at a disadvantage because of linguistic ability, whether ESB or EAL, rather than differentiate on the basis of "local" versus "international". This principle of "ethical" or non-discriminatory testing is increasingly becoming a factor in determining testing strategy (see Swinburne's discussion paper, '*Communications in the Australian context*' Project). It also followed the trend of early language screening for first year students, both domestic and international, already introduced by several UoM faculties, as mentioned above. In addition, data obtained by the Task Force showed that the academic progress of students entering through the VCE ESL pathway – "local" students as opposed to "international" – was 5% lower than

³ Excluding Exchange and Study Abroad students.

those entering through VCE standard English, IELTS and TOEFL, and persisted at this level throughout their tertiary career (*Application of the proposed framework*, 2007, p. 5). Thus the principle of inclusivity both took into account our diverse student body and also better reflected our aim of developing “credible” levels of English for *all* graduates.

2.3. Language programs

The Task Force recommendations deemed that faculties should decide their own language enrichment programs and that they must fit with the degree structure from financial and time perspectives. The range of programs, many also available to students in the second and third bands (“support recommended” and “language sufficient”), included the following:

1. Credit bearing English as a Second Language subjects offered by the SLL. Under the Melbourne Model, these subjects are considered University “breadth subjects” and thus fulfil a requirement within each degree structure.
2. Adjunct tutorial programs offered by the ASU. These are weekly tutorials, in addition to the mainstream tutorials, that support a core first-year subject, using the subject content as a vehicle to teach the tertiary language and academic skills, and scaffold assessment tasks.
3. Workshops and short courses, both generic as well as discipline and subject-based English for Academic Purposes. These are offered by both the central and faculty academic and language support providers, and some are online.
4. Individual tutorials. These are meant to complement any of the above, and in particular be incorporated as part of a study plan for students whose needs may not be accommodated by the other programs.

Faculty decisions about the suitability of each program were based on the following: long term viability, course structure, student choice of breadth options and expected academic outcomes. An example of the first type of program is Engineering, whose undergraduate course is being phased out in 2010. With this in mind, it was more practical to refer students to the well-established credit subject Academic English (175-120) than to develop an entirely new language enrichment program. An example of the second type was the Victorian College of the Arts⁴, whose course structure prohibited in the short term the addition of another subject. Science made the decision to allow their students freedom in “breadth” selection, rather than compel them to enrol in an English language credit subject. The Environments elected to continue with the adjunct tutorial program, already well established within the faculty, because of its past effectiveness.

For faculties where the number of students in the “support required” band was not expected to be high, and other factors such as campus location were significant, support would be determined on a case-by-case basis (e.g., Veterinary Science), and may involve a program of workshops and individual tutorials, depending on the student’s specific needs. Table 1 lists the language programs by faculty.

Table 1. Language enrichment program by undergraduate degree.

Faculty	Language Support
Architecture, Building and Planning (ABP)	Adjunct Tutorial Program: Reshaping Environments
Arts	Academic English (175-120)
Economics and Commerce (FEC)	Academic English for Economics and Commerce (175-125)
Education	N/A

⁴ The VCA amalgamated with the Faculty of Music in April 2009 and is now known as the Victorian College of the Arts and Music (VCAM).

Table 1. cont'd.

Faculty	Language Support
Engineering	Academic English (175-120)
Land and Environment	Adjunct Tutorial Program: Maths or Biology
Law	N/A
MDHS (Biomedicine)	Adjunct Tutorial Program: Maths or Biology
MDHS (Dental Science and Physiotherapy)	Referral to Clinical Communication and Learning Development programs
Faculty	Language Support
Music	Academic English (175-120)
Science	Adjunct Tutorial Program: Maths or Biology
Veterinary Science	Tailored support on a case by case basis
Victorian College of the Arts (VCA)	Adjunct Tutorial Program: CFI (Better Speaking and Writing)

3. Implementation: Coordination and communication

With its recommendations delivered to Academic Board, the Task Force was disbanded. Internal stakeholders were thus informed of the language testing policy through a number of other channels: the Academic Board Chair (also chair of the Task Force), Office of the Provost, Vice Principal and Academic Registrar and various units and committees. A diverse range of interests came into play, with varying areas of influence. Some agents were academic staff and others professional, and each had a particular focus regarding implementation. Whilst one liaised with the Admissions team to determine how to identify the targeted students in the absence of adequate systems support⁵, another worked with faculty student centre managers to inform operational plans. Still others worked across groups to determine language support programs, provide advice and develop promotional materials. Training sessions about DELA and language issues were developed as part of the newly established Student Advice Program, designed to inform and support the Student Adviser position, a keystone to the Melbourne Student Services Model. However, there was no central driving authority coordinating implementation, specifically the communication process for internal stakeholders.

A number of other communication strategies were employed to ensure our external stakeholders were familiar with the policy. As the new policy impacted potential students in particular, informing relevant sectors through Marketing and Recruitment was considered essential. Information was incorporated into the Future Students website by mid-2008, overseas agents and local schools were notified, orientation programs were updated, and a DELA web site was constructed as a resource for students and staff.

Because of shortfalls within the student system, students whose language study scores fell below the threshold were manually identified by the Admissions team. This information was then relayed to faculties on four separate spreadsheets, coinciding with deadlines for both Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) offers and international acceptances. The fact

⁵ The UoM's current student system does not have the capacity to systematically identify students' language entry scores, and at the time of language policy implementation, was set to be replaced in early 2009. This "go live" date has been postponed until mid 2010.

that two of the spreadsheets included all VTAC *offers*, as opposed to acceptances, only added to the complexity of the identification process and the workload of the student centres in the lead up to orientation.

Faculties then took the responsibility for personally notifying each student of the requirement to sit DELA. A letter template explaining the University's language policy and its benefits to students was carefully drafted by the LTRC and the ASU (co-administrators of DELA). Attention was given to the wording of this correspondence in order to present DELA as a positive initiative with clear advantages to the students. Phrases such as 'maximise your success' and 'University's commitment to supporting you' formed the correspondence, as did the notion of inclusivity: 'you, along with many other beginning university students....' Follow-up conversations or presentations about the DELA requirement were also conducted by most faculties. Test presentation and its relationship to the test purpose is increasingly becoming an integral factor in successful implementation: in order to achieve the desired impact, consideration for the test audience and stakeholders must be taken into account (Read & Chapelle, 2001; Brown, 2008; Read, 2008). This kind of consideration is particularly crucial in the low stakes test arena that is post-entry language assessment, in so far as taking this kind of test may appear to have less tangible outcomes compared to the more explicit result of gaining entry to the institution. As Read noted with regards to the Auckland experience, "it is important to create a positive internal motivation based on a recognition of the benefits that the results of the assessment may bring for the student" (p. 185).

4. Test outcomes

4.1. Participation

Initial outcomes from semester 1 2009, as measured in overall participation and impact, were very positive. A total of 665 students sat DELA as part of the orientation process – an increase of 50% compared to the same period in the previous year when DELA was voluntary. The majority, 532, were undergraduate (approximately 8% of the total commencing undergraduate cohort); 133 were graduate, or 80% and 20% respectively of the total tested.

However, despite the significant increase in uptake, faculties also reported varying degrees of compliance for DELA across the undergraduate degrees. For two (Biomedicine and Environments), a result of 100% of targeted students was achieved, whereas Music was as low as 19%. For those faculties who provided data, percentages in descending order were as follows: 87% (VCA), 79% (FEC), 63% (Science) and 24% (Engineering). Nonetheless, this translates into a compliance rate of around 68% for undergraduate students, a not insignificant achievement for the first semester of mandatory testing.

Interestingly, despite the uneven landscape with regards to compliance, a number of students voluntarily took up DELA. For example, Engineering reported that 56 undergraduate Engineering students self-identified for the language assessment; FEC reported 57 undergraduate "volunteers". This phenomenon was not restricted to these two faculties.

4.2. Results

A total of 86 students (67 undergraduate and 19 graduate), or 13%, achieved a score in the lower or "support required" band (3.3 or less out of 6). All of these students were EAL. Another 192, or 29%, scored in the middle "support recommended" band (3.4-4). This means that 42% of assessed students achieved a score in the lower two bands. The remaining 387 students or 58% received a score in the upper band (greater than 4) at which level their language skills were diagnosed as "sufficient".

One hundred and fifty-one ESB undergraduate students and one ESB graduate student, self-identified through a questionnaire at the commencement of DELA, participated in the assessment. Of the undergraduate cohort, none achieved a score in the "required" band and only eight scored in the "recommended band", or 5% of this cohort. All students who sat DELA were

informed via a database-generated email of their results and recommendations for language enrichment programs. They were also advised to seek further information from their respective faculties, although not all did so. Faculties also followed up with students in the “support required” band – and some in the “support recommended” band. This took the form of face-to-face consultations, group presentations, and email correspondence.

4.3. Impact

Impact has been described as the effect of the test on its stakeholders, both from an educational as well as social perspective. It includes the phenomenon of consequential validity, or broadly speaking, the implications of introducing the test on validity, including changing the behaviours of teachers and students prior to the test, or washback. The introduction of a test thus has consequences for what the test is measuring. (McNamara, 2000; Read & Chapelle, 2001). In terms of the UoM experience, the implementation of mandatory language assessment had a number of spin-off effects, some of which were anticipated and others which were not.

In addition to the lift in participation rates, the test implementation had a direct impact on the understanding of language issues and practices around supporting students at risk. This apparent “consciousness raising” around the University manifested itself in several ways. Firstly, faculties had to articulate and promote a preferred language enrichment program for their students, which meant that forums of consultation and consideration occurred in most faculties. For some, these discussions then translated into the development of subject-based adjunct tutorial programs and an “ownership” of both the program and the process for engaging students in it. Secondly, there was an enhanced understanding of language issues by faculty student centre administration, who played a key role in targeting and informing students. For many of these staff, the implementation process also meant opportunities for training specific to DELA, the international student experience and language issues in general. Finally, there was an increased student understanding of the rationale behind testing, with some students self-selecting for DELA believing that it would be advantageous to the start of their university studies: “I have met the language entry requirements (a score of 30 VCE English) and thus am exempt from DELA. However, I would like to know if I could sit the test anyway as it may help me in my studies” (student conversation).

Impact was also evidenced by the increasing incidence of language specialists being invited to contribute to curriculum development and inform teaching practices in some faculties. Language support staff were also asked to participate in mid-year orientation, in particular advising students about the benefits of DELA, an initiative designed to increase participation in follow-up language enrichment programs. Finally, initial evidence showed a possible washback effect: that of higher English language entry scores for one feeder cohort – interpreted by some as an apparent desire to be exempt from DELA upon entry.

5. Discussion

5.1. Coordination and communication challenges

Despite the best of intentions and effort, the absence of a central coordinating authority led to a disjointed implementation. As a whole, the process was visibly uneven, both in depth and breadth. Follow through to ensure faculty staff were informed of the policy and familiar with the relevant language programs and strategies for identifying students occurred unevenly. This also meant that the resource implications of the implementation were not thoroughly considered in the planning process: for the majority of staff, implementation became an “add-on” to an already heavy workload, particularly around the resource-intensive orientation time. One faculty has estimated that the cost of implementation was equivalent to seven days work of a level HEW 6 staff.

From a staff perspective, anecdotal information suggested that there was a general lack of understanding of the policy by faculty staff not directly involved with language support, specifically which students it targeted; whether it was compulsory or not; and which language

support option each faculty had confirmed. It was clear that communication of the policy and its relevance to specific faculties had failed to reach staff dealing directly with students. It was also clear that consultation regarding the faculty-preferred language program had also failed to take into account particular course pathways within a degree structure. One faculty reported that students wishing to use their breadth option to develop a major were not able to do so because of the requirement to enrol in the Academic English subject.

There appeared to be, in addition, a lack of universal commitment to the new policy, despite Academic Board approval (in fact, it may be that this too was not understood). This resistance by some faculties seemed to represent a degree of disagreement with the policy, in particular the testing of ESB students who achieve high ENTER scores (the median at Melbourne was around 94 out of 100 in 2009), and the “negative marketing” that the policy conveyed to prospective students. These misunderstandings and disagreements affected staff across all levels of the faculties and in particular their ability to communicate effectively the benefits of testing to students.

From a student perspective, faculties also reported that many, both local and international, were confused and questioned the need for a post-entry language assessment when they had already met the minimum English language requirements. Others simply refused to sit DELA. That it did not affect admission did not register with either students or staff, many of whom believed the DELA was a condition of enrolment (it was not). This could be because it was not well enough articulated in the communication process. Read (2008), however, comments that despite promotion of the DELNA at Auckland as not affecting admissions, “students find this hard to believe [which may] account for the relatively low participation rate” (p. 189).

Finally, faculties reported the difficulty in communicating to students the “compulsory” nature of the assessment when in fact there was no tangible “consequence” apparent for non-compliance. The only consequence students faced was a potentially unfavourable decision on their continued enrolment should they present before the Unsatisfactory Progress Committee. Faculty staff instead were put into a position of persuading students, many of them ESB, about the benefits of language assessment – a challenging task for student advisers who may not have fully understood the policy applications yet had to manage this particular cohort during an already busy time of the year. A lack of clarity around appropriate and consistent communication to students who achieved a result in the middle band of “support recommended” (3.4-4) – as opposed to “required” – further complicated the process: should faculties invest the same amount of time and resources in the follow up and provision of support for this cohort?

It must be noted, however, that much of the coordination and communication processes took place in 2008, the year the Melbourne Model was introduced. Priorities lay with both the successful delivery of our six New Generation degrees and also the restructure of student administration and services into a one-stop shop. This was change on a massive scale. With this disruption to existing working relationships and communication channels, it is not altogether surprising that some faculty staff, both professional and academic, struggled with the implementation.

5.2. Compliance

5.2.1. Test compliance

The second challenge was that of compliance, both in taking the test and also in taking up the support. As noted above, there was approximately a 68% compliance rate, and some students voluntarily took up DELA. However, compliance was uneven and posed a risk to the University: to have a policy that is not enforced can be perceived as meritless by both students and staff, thus further eroding possible benefits. Although no systematic follow up of non-compliant students has yet occurred, anecdotal information suggests several reasons for failure to take up DELA. One was the belief that the test was not personally applicable, which alludes to a general misunderstanding of the University’s rationale for testing: “Last year I studied VCE Literature and only received a 28 ... I have no problem listening, reading or writing as English

is my first language” (student email). Another was the belief that entry language requirements had already been met. Stigma and the related concern that DELA results would appear on student transcripts also factored into non-compliance. Similarly, Elder and von Randow (2008) reported embarrassment as a factor for getting students to return for diagnostic testing after initial screening, as was the “fear of being branded linguistically inept” (p. 190). No doubt, a certain anxiety was produced by mandating DELA at this institution, particularly as students believed that they had already met entry requirements – a recurring theme that the faculty student centres reported in their conversations with students. Late arrival also played a role, with some students simply missing the examination times. Other factors worth considering are the time needed to sit the test – 2 hours – and the conventional pen and paper delivery method. These two factors are believed to have contributed to the lower participation rate in the conventional diagnostic compared to the 20-minute online screening test at Auckland (Elder & von Randow, 2008). Certainly the University will need to explore further why students did not take up DELA if it wants to improve compliance – and more importantly, intervention.

5.2.2. Support compliance

Compliance with regard to support was also fraught. Faculties reported that some students ignored the faculty-chosen support program and instead took up other support programs, or ignored the support requirement altogether. These results mirrored somewhat those at Auckland, where Bright and von Randow (2004) reported advice regarding language support was often disregarded, and students’ responses were “sporadic and unfocused, and unlikely to address their real needs” (p. 2). They cited a lack of time, intense workload and information overload as the main reasons why students did not follow recommendations. Another factor noted by these authors was the mismatch in expectations:

Many [students] ... saw the responsibility for their language improvement as residing in the University, especially their department or faculty. So they expected their teachers to provide direction, for example, through comments on their language use and suggestions on how to improve it. (p. 5)

This expectation gap was also reported by Ransom et al. (2005). In their study of the perceptions and expectations of international EAL students, 96% of respondents expected “the subject teacher to help them with any difficulty” (p. 6). Clearly, non-compliance with language support needs to be explored further at the UoM; understanding the reasons behind student decisions and thus developing informed strategies for increasing participation would make sense considering the resources already invested in both the diagnostic process and the development of enrichment programs. If students do not avail themselves of the support, these allocated resources are misplaced, if not wasted.

Problematic too, was enrolment into non-credit programs. As with many support programs that do not award credit, student attendance is not guaranteed, and often decreases over time. Although students in these programs were followed up by their respective student centres, many still chose not to attend, or attended sporadically. As part of the monitoring process, non-compliance is recorded and can factor in cases of unsatisfactory progress – but by then it is too late.

Faculty follow up for students who did not sit DELA and/or did not take up the required support needs to be clarified. Should there be a consistent University response to non-compliant students, or will each faculty determine its own response? To what degree should faculties let students reap the benefits or consequences of their decisions? How often should faculties communicate with students before it becomes a case of harassment? Should there be a university-wide response to non-compliance? It could be argued that individual faculty responses would undermine the benefits of the University’s language policy.

6. Summary and conclusion

In the year leading up to policy implementation, the UoM was undergoing a major transformation in curriculum and services. As the New Generation degrees were rolled out, the Melbourne Student Services Model to support the vision was also implemented. This meant a philosophical and structural change of significant proportion. Moreover, the Task Force had been disbanded, and it was unclear where the definitive responsibility for operationalising the policy lay. The result was that a number of key people and groups worked in parallel rather than in coordination to progress implementation, with none having a clear imprimatur for doing so. It could be argued that the introduction of such a policy at a time of unprecedented change was ambitious. However, without clear leadership, it was perhaps more difficult than it should have been. With regards to the Auckland experience, Read (2008) insists that “much more is involved, with a firm commitment by senior management being a crucial element in the successful operation of [a language testing program]” (p. 189).

That an uneven understanding of the policy occurred across the faculties could also be attributed to the absence of central coordination. Communication strategies, despite their apparent thoroughness, were not always as effective as intended: student centre staff were often unclear about who the policy targeted or what support programs were available; many students were unconvinced of the benefits and resistant to testing. In retrospect, it may well be that greater consultation with faculties and schools as part of the Task Force’s agenda may have prevented these misunderstandings as well as the push-back from both staff and students. As Brown (2008) advises, test development must take into account the stakeholders “because knowing their opinions can help testers develop strategies for countering naïve or ignorant views about the test, and ... because stakeholders who are asked for their views will feel more involved in the testing and have a bigger stake in it” (p. 284).

As a result of this first test administration under the new policy, a forum of internal stakeholders (faculties, Admissions, LTRC, Student Advice Program) was held to debrief and discuss improved communication processes and a common response to compliance. Recommendations have led to the introduction of a student-focused flyer about language testing; an enhanced DELA website, including more explicit information about the rationale of testing and a sample DELA test (go to <http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/services/DELA/index.html>); and collaboration on the development of a training module for student advisers, amongst other improvements⁶. The issue of compliance, although still fraught, was clarified by the Provost: “I think we should go as far as a positive statement about the extra assistance the UoM offers people with particular English scores coupled with a clear statement that we regard this as a requirement” (P. McPhee, personal communication, May 14, 2009). However, this issue continues to be a topic of discussion at Academic Board committees, and it is entirely likely that the mandatory nature of the DELA will be reviewed.

Despite the hurdles experienced in this implementation process, the new language policy was deemed successful in terms of both uptake in DELA and also impact. Participation in DELA lifted significantly in semester 1, 2009 – up 50% from semester 1, 2008. More importantly, the role of English language assessment and the importance of language enrichment programs have become a more integrated part of the University landscape as a result of implementation. Testing will gradually become part of the culture of support at this institution. With so many other Australian universities also introducing post-entry language testing, this will be a clear message to prospective students about the importance of continuing to develop academic English skills.

However, to fully understand the impact of language assessment and the effect of our language programs, particularly in relationship to language improvement, further research will need to occur. It is also clear that there remain opportunities for review and refinement of our

⁶ Semester 2 will trial an online DELA registration to facilitate test management and a more coordinated system for identifying students targeted for testing.

communication and follow-up strategies. For those universities contemplating the introduction of a post-entry English language assessment, the experiences at the UoM may provide some useful guidelines.

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