

PELA for a smaller, not-for-profit campus: Our story

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(Received 3 August, 2023. Published online 3 February, 2024.)

This article outlines the step-by-step process one small tertiary education provider is taking in establishing a Post-entry Language Assessment (PELA) on campus. Sheridan Institute of Higher Education has less than 100 students, is not-for-profit, upholds face-to-face learning, and has only one faculty member functioning as Academic Language and Learning (ALL) staff. In these ways, it is unique. Challenges have ensued around transitioning into a new system, dealing with student perceptions of what the PELA entails, completing the whole process within a reasonable time frame, and needing a high level of faculty participation. One highlight is the development of three compulsory undergraduate research units that underpin Sheridan's embedding of academic literacies. Suggestions for further development and research have been included.

Key Words: PELA, English language competence, embedding academic literacies, higher education.

1. Introduction

Established by Australian Baptist Education 10 years ago, Sheridan Institute of Higher Education (SIHE or Sheridan) is a not-for-profit institution located in Perth, Western Australia. It currently serves 78 students, both domestic and international, who come from a variety of faith backgrounds. A mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate courses is offered across four main disciplines: Business, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS), and Mathematics and Sciences. We began our Post-entry Language Assessment (PELA) journey in February 2020. Since then, we have used the PELA diagnostic tool eight times, including the Pilot, administering it at the start of each teaching block.

Rolling out a PELA is not new, but our journey has been different for several reasons. As a small, not-for-profit institution, we work on a lean budget and have limited resources. The PELA process involves much more than the administration of a test. It is what happens afterwards, in terms of giving feedback and providing ongoing literacy support, that is crucial (Read, 2019). Where larger institutions generally rely on several Academic Language and Learning (ALL) staff to offer and coordinate this support, we have only one faculty member (the PELA Coordinator) in this role. In addition, our PELA process now includes one compulsory research unit for each undergraduate student in each year of their study. This model helps facilitate our embedding of academic literacies. To deliver quality support across campus, then, it has been essential to have buy-in from almost all faculty. Another difference is that Sheridan is committed to face-to-face learning. Unfortunately, the presence of COVID-19 and its variants have shadowed our PELA process almost

every trimester (now semester) and, as we are not delivering online, this has created additional challenges.

For these reasons, our story adds a unique contribution to the research literature regarding post-entry academic language assessment and development practices. As a result, it may encourage smaller tertiary campuses to consider implementing a PELA.

2. Background

The PELA diagnostic tool is designed to gather information on a student's academic English proficiency level after enrolment. Six years ago, Barthel (2017) surveyed the 39 universities in Australia; out of the 33 who responded, 23 were using a PELA of some description. There are at least three key reasons why educators feel the need to measure a student's post-entry English language competency.

To begin with, a well-designed PELA tool can provide a snapshot, for both students and faculty, of the areas in which a student needs to grow (Knoch & Elder, 2013; Ransom, 2009). Some have found there is no guarantee a student's pre-admission pathway results (e.g. a standardised test, the completion of a particular course, or work experience) indicate success at the higher education level. Wingate (2016) reminds us academic literacy involves skill in using discipline-specific genres and discourse conventions and, as immersion in an academic community facilitates the acquisition of these skills, probably all students will need language support of some kind after enrolment. However, in all disciplines, a foundational level of academic language skills is assumed, and a lack of entry-level readiness in many students has been a theme in the literature for over a decade (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014; Dunworth, 2009; Knoch & Elder, 2013; Ransom, 2009; Read & von Randow, 2013; Read, 2019).

A second reason for the introduction of a PELA is the link between English language proficiency and employability, particularly in relation to international students (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014; Lydster & Brown, 2017; Ransom, 2009). In a pivotal article published in 2006, Birrell examined new data regarding the English levels of overseas students who, after graduating from a university course, had been granted a Permanent Residency visa (implying they were 'job ready' as professionals). He found about 30% of the 2005–06 cohort were not operating at a competent IELTS 6 level, the entrance level requirement for tertiary courses. Birrell (2006) asked why these students were accepted into such courses and how they managed to pass them. His article sparked an interesting debate and forced the Australian government to act (Harris, 2013).

A third factor influencing the uptake of PELAs is the moral obligation to adhere to best practice. In 2007, Australian Education International (AEI) – a government body – and the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) jointly organised a national symposium to discuss some of the issues raised by Birrell's article (Dunworth, 2009; Read, 2019). One important outcome was the generation of the Australian Universities Quality Agency's (AUQA) *Good Practice Principles* (2009). These 10 principles have been foundational in driving change and – since their crafting – many key reviews, reports, and Acts have been generated (see Harris, 2013; Knoch & Elder, 2013), setting out further guidelines. Currently, the *Higher Education Standards Framework* (2021) outlines minimum standards for higher education providers. These include assessment of readiness, identification of additional support needed, and early provision of formative feedback regarding academic progress (Australian Government, Federal Register of Legislation, 2021). A well-designed and properly implemented PELA can help meet these goals.

In different institutions, PELA tools are structured and administered differently. Of the 23 universities who responded to Barthel's survey (2017), *Academic Writing* was the skill most often assessed (83%) with *Reading* coming in second (61%). How students are prompted in writing tasks also varies. Curtin University, for instance, has one type of PELA that uses images to help prompt students who are visual learners (Baird & Dooley, 2017). Implementation of the PELA diagnostic tool is also diverse: some institutions roll it out across the whole campus; others focus

on students in specific faculties or units. Many have an online version; some prefer the paper-based approach. There are also differences in how results are communicated and acted upon. For a recent overview of PELAs in the Australian context, see Read (2019).

Once students have sat the PELA, educators face the challenge of how to help them develop language skills. A higher education student will encounter spoken and written texts and tasks that require a certain level of ‘academic’ literacy. However, even within academia, different disciplines and communities have their own set of terminology, social norms, and discursive practices that students need to master. To capture this diversity, Lea and Street (2006), amongst others, use the term *academic literacies*.

In the past, literacy development has been framed in terms of three overlapping models – *study skills*, *academic socialization*, and *academic literacies* – between which Lea and Street (2006) differentiate. With the first model, surface language features are targeted, and reading and writing are seen as individualistic (rather than social), cognitive skills – easily transferrable from one context to another. Students who lack mastery, often non-native English speakers (NNSs), are often ‘referred’ to a workshop or unit to help remedy their ‘deficit’ (Murray, 2016). With the academic socialisation model, particular genres and linguistic moves required for discipline-specific contexts are made explicit. Here, the focus is on enculturation, but a weakness of this approach is the assumption that once these skills are mastered, students will be able to carry them into another context (Lea & Street, 2006). The third approach, academic literacies, differs from the second in that it especially focuses on “relationships of power, authority, meaning making, and identity that are implicit in the use of literary practices within specific institutional settings” (Murray, 2016, pp. 228–229). There is an emphasis on learning for both students and staff regarding the writing process (Lea & Street, 2006); and support is framed as something everyone, not just NNSs, may need (Murray, 2016). Another feature of this third model is the importance placed on students receiving feedback throughout the writing process (Lea & Street, 2006).

Murray (2016) makes the essential point that embracing an academic literacies approach, which he strongly advocates, requires a structural change in how language support is delivered. Traditionally, support has been either *non-integrated* (e.g. providing self-help resources, bridging programs, and workshops) – more of a study skills model – or *integrated* (e.g. via orientation activities, guest lectures, and assessment scaffolding resources) (Hoadley & Hunter, 2018). To embrace an academic literacies model, however, Murray (2016) argues for a move away from centralisation to decentralisation whereby ALL staff are positioned within faculties or individual departments to help facilitate the *embedding* of academic literacies within the curriculum. This enables all students to access language support but usually requires an upskilling of faculty members (Murray, 2016; Podorova, 2016). Subject lecturers need to play a key role as embedding involves building academic literacy skills into course, subject, assessment, and feedback design along with instructional practices (Hoadley & Hunter, 2018). It is important to note that campuses may be using more than one model simultaneously, with the delivery of academic literacy support covering a spectrum of non-integrated to embedded practices.

According to Read (2019), the terms ‘integrated’ and ‘embedded’ are still being used interchangeably throughout the literature. For example, he seems to equate Wingate’s (2015, 2016) understanding of integration with what others are labelling as embedding (Read, 2019). Wingate (2016), herself, uses both terms when describing the design and implementation of a module to further train postgraduate literacy instructors. She argues for “curriculum-integrated academic literacy instruction” to help lecturers “embed academic literacy development into their teaching practice” (2016, p. 349). Of the six embedding methods she proposes (orientation activities; guided pre-reading tasks eliciting written responses and discussion; in-class sessions unpacking literacy conventions and requirements; out-of-class, follow-up tutorials; formative feedback; and one-on-one student meetings with a tutor/academic advisor to discuss feedback), it is difficult to separate integrated from embedded. Like others, Wingate (2016) stresses how important a role

subject lecturers play in the success of any embedding. Although ALL staff are sometimes involved in the design and delivery of units and assessments, it is faculty members, she states, who should take responsibility for teaching students how to write within respective genres.

It seems achieving this level of commitment from lecturers and providing appropriate, scaffolded tasks through which students can develop academic literacies has been difficult. A decade ago, Harris reported that students in 80% of 'PELA units' at Edith Cowan University (ECU) were receiving "embedded or adjunct support" (2013, A-71). This was mainly for first-year students, although all students had access to writing support, and it was provided by ALL staff within tutorials. Three years later, at ECU, De Maio and Desierto (2016) researched students' perceptions of embedded literacy support in a first-year business unit. Although generally a positive experience for students, the embedding focused on skills needed for writing an email, was delivered only twice in 12 weeks, and was run by ALL staff – albeit in collaboration with the subject lecturer. At James Cook University in Singapore, first-year Business students identified as having weaker writing skills were provided contextualised, embedded English writing workshops in a compulsory unit (Wong et al., 2017). The required writing task only involved generating an assignment-specific paragraph with, again, ALL staff providing the instruction.

Murray and Nallaya (2016) seem to have had more success with embedding academic literacies development. They report on how one South Australian university trialled the embedding of academic literacies in two first-year degree programmes, providing an insightful window into the rigorous process of helping stakeholders come to grips with what academic literacies are and how they can be taught and assessed. From an earlier pilot, they learned the importance of defining academic literacies and discussing the rationale behind their embedding, understanding which of these literacies respective faculty perceived as essential, working backwards from here in designing change, and teaching literacies in logical progression at the point when students most need them. In rolling out the new embedding process, ALL staff were appointed as facilitators. They gave lecturers a list of academic literacies along a continuum from more complex to less (in terms of higher order thinking) with examples of what embedding looks like. To begin with, Course Coordinators chose only two relevant academic literacies and lecturers were given a framework consisting of course details (name, code, and aims), learning objectives, scaffolding, and assessment tasks and weightings to implement. This mapping of academic literacies to relevant assessment tasks which, in turn, are mapped to learning outcomes and course aims is essential to track if, when, and how academic literacies are being addressed in the classroom (Murray & Nallaya, 2016). Several challenges were encountered during the embedding project: quality collaboration from faculty was not always forthcoming, not all subject lecturers perceived teaching and developing students' academic literacies as their role, and – if they chose not to – there was no 'penalty' for non-compliance.

The University of Technology in Sydney (UTS) is an example of academic literacy embedding being rolled out across a whole institution (Edwards et al., 2021). Their framework incorporates both a compulsory PELA (or OPELA, with the *O* denoting *online*) for all students and the embedding of academic literacy with ALL staff upskilling faculty members in the design of units, assessments, and rubrics. ALL staff were also involved in teaching. An additional element, not seen in other projects, is that students receive this embedded language support for the total length of their degree.

Students are a key stakeholder in the PELA process, so their views should be considered when developing effective interventions. Along this line, more recently, O'Neill et al. (2022) explored international, postgraduate students' perceptions of embedded academic literacy support on four CQUniversity campuses across eastern Australia. Subject lecturers were team-teaching alongside ALL staff. Over the course of a month, students planned assessment tasks, located and assessed sources, referenced, paraphrased, and structured paragraphs and reports. From their perspective, the benefits of this type of embedding included: an increase in confidence, improvement in how

to reference, and the acquisition of ‘transferrable skills.’ Students also praised a participatory, learner-focused instructional approach which carried into feedback practices.

Providing effective feedback is important in the process of embedding academic literacies. For Ajjawi and Boud (2018), such feedback is dialogic whereby students and lecturers discuss not only assessments but also emotional/relational needs and curriculum organisation. In a similar manner, Dunworth and Sanchez (2016) state ‘good’ feedback incorporates the *affective/interpersonal* (feeling built up, motivated, and connected), the *orientational* (being able to position oneself within the requirements of discipline-specific genres, individual rubrics, and teacher expectations), and the *transformational* (being invited into life-long change). For these three dimensions to be present, feedback needs to be formative as well as summative (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016). Sheridan’s learning delivery model lends itself to a dialogic PELA process. Face-to-face, interactive feedback is built into the relaying of PELA results, the ongoing assessments in each of the three research units, and the mentoring of students as they undertake a research project (see Sections 3.10 & 3.11). Faculty sometimes need upskilling to give more constructive feedback around language development. To aid lecturers at Monash University, Podorova (2016) designed an Academic Language Feedback (ALF) toolkit. Academic staff are provided a comments bank template, a ‘plan of action’ template (if students need further help), and development materials (including marked, worked examples using the ALF rubric). Their students can access electronic, scaffolded, self-help resources matching skill areas. At Sheridan, we link everyone into both paper-based and electronic language support materials and train faculty to use appropriate metalanguage.

Against this background, this paper reports on our PELA journey: getting started, designing and piloting the first tools, developing training materials, upskilling faculty, administering the compulsory PELA, outlining the benefits of a face-to-face PELA, embedding academic literacies, facing challenges, and considering areas for further development and research.

3. Our PELA story

The following narrative has been constructed from personal communication received from D. Catterick and N. Leitão from February to August 2020, as well as from the author’s involvement in the PELA process as both the ALL faculty member and the PELA Coordinator. To keep themes together, most of the narrative stages begin with a description of our initial action followed by information regarding our current practice. Appendix A outlines Sheridan’s 15-week-long PELA cycle and includes a glossary explaining different roles and components.

3.1. Getting started (February 3–6, 2020)

At a time when Sheridan leadership was further discussing best practice regarding academic literacy support, student retention, and graduate employability, a visiting Canadian scholar – on sabbatical from Briercrest College – settled into campus life. As an Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics (TESOL), Dr David Catterick was well placed to lead faculty into deeper discussion regarding a PELA. In a short document, he outlined the PELA’s origins and part of its history within Australian universities and posed 11 essential questions (see [Appendix B](#)) concerning the possible rollout of a PELA at Sheridan. This document was presented to the new working committee consisting of: Dr Catterick; the Executive Principal; the Academic Principal; the Director of Excellence and Innovation; the Deans of Business, Education, and Science; the acting Dean of HASS; and the ALL faculty member. Having these key stakeholders on board from the beginning has been essential, setting up a culture where success is possible. Each of the 11 questions was thoroughly considered. Table 1 below provides a summary of Sheridan’s current PELA. Both the headings under *Characteristic* and the descriptors under *Type* come from the *Degrees of Proficiency* website (as cited in Barthel, 2017). The consensus was to proceed with the design and rollout of a discipline-specific PELA using Catterick’s expertise. He proposed a timetable of staged action, keeping in mind he would only be in Perth for six months.

The delivery of both Sheridan's PELA and ongoing academic writing support has been shaped by an unswerving commitment to offer face-to-face education. We believe we can build more robust relationships and offer better support this way, resulting in more effective learning. Harding and Thompson (2011) highlight the importance of strong relationships. They surveyed 22 higher education providers in the UK, looking for key themes that underscore the improvement of student retention and success. Their results showed stronger relationships, both faculty to student and student to student, was one indicator of success. Such relationships may be harder to grow and nurture in an online environment. Commenting on the negative experiences of thousands of undergraduate students across the nation during COVID lockdowns, as indicated by the 2019–2020 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) scores, Campus Intuition (2021) reminds us that connections and relationships are best built in a physical rather than an online space.

Table 1. A snapshot of Sheridan's current PELA.

Characteristic	Type
<i>Organisation</i>	Institution-wide (across Business, Education, HASS, and Science)
<i>Design</i>	In-house; co-designed with visiting, external advisor
<i>Content</i>	A short reading passage as a writing prompt, plus a glossary Instructions to write three task-specific paragraphs (> 75 words each) Instructions to include an in-text citation Discipline-specific register
<i>Mode</i>	Paper-based, face-to-face Timed (10 mins of Reading, 50 mins of Writing) Compulsory (except for those taking a single unit) Supervised Secure Available during Orientation Week (and Weeks 1–2 for latecomers) Non-automated marking (by a trained, professional writer/academic)
<i>Target</i>	All students (except for those taking a single unit)
<i>Feedback</i>	A two-page rubric with descriptors, plus individual written feedback Face-to-face delivery by the School Dean (or designated faculty members) Mainly confidential, but seen by those giving feedback and shared with both the Academic Principal and the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) faculty member (i.e. the PELA Coordinator)
<i>Follow-up</i>	A recommendation to voluntarily attend the free Editing Workshops on campus, if required / Embedded academic literacy skills through three compulsory research units

3.2. Designing the first PELA Writing Task and Feedback Tool (February 6–27, 2020)

Catterick wrote the first Writing Task (Business) and presented it to the working committee. Initial feedback was positive, but faculty members desired more explicit instructions concerning how the reading passage related to the writing task, what each paragraph should entail, how long the writing response should be, and what the assessor would be looking for. The updated version, which was accepted for the Pilot, consisted of the following:

- a set of reading instructions,
- a discipline-specific reading passage of around 400–500 words acting as a writing prompt,
- a glossary (12 discipline-specific words featured in the reading passage, chosen by Catterick, to enhance comprehension as students have no access to dictionaries while sitting the PELA),
- the bibliographic details of the reading prompt (as students are asked to use some of the material from the passage and to include an in-text citation), and
- a set of writing instructions for three paragraphs (specifically not requiring an introductory or concluding paragraph).

Catterick’s Feedback Tool, to be completed by the Marker of the PELA script, was a two-page rubric. Again, the working committee provided input. The third version came with instructions for the Marker and was used in the Pilot. This Feedback Tool has been tweaked numerous times in small ways, based on recommendations from the Marker and the PELA Coordinator, but it remains true to the original. See [Appendix C](#) for our current version.

The tool can be filled in either manually or electronically by ticking boxes and making short comments. Students are graded as being either *Good–G*, *Satisfactory–S*, or *Poor–P* on a range of descriptors under the key areas of: *Structure*, *Grammatical accuracy*, *Lexical range and accuracy*, *Communicative purpose*, and *Style and argument*. If a student falls between two categories (e.g. *Good* and *Satisfactory*), they receive a blended score (e.g. *G/S*) for a particular set of descriptors.

3.3. Piloting the Business Writing Task and Feedback Tool (March 1–24, 2020)

To find participants for the Pilot, our Executive Principal emailed students asking for five volunteers. Those who responded were three Bachelor of Business (BBus) students, and one student each from the Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Master of Education (MEd) programs: an extremely small sample. The volunteers filled in an evaluation survey both before and after sitting the PELA. Each agreed taking the PELA at the commencement of their studies was beneficial, the length (60 minutes) was sufficient, and having discipline-specific variations was valuable. They also said the writing of only three paragraphs was insufficient to demonstrate cohesion and that more than just writing skills should be assessed (although when told the PELA would be longer this way, became less enthusiastic). The Business students were excited lecturers would give them both verbal and written feedback on their writing. However, some of the volunteers thought incoming students who score poorly on the PELA might fear termination of their enrolment, so they urged Sheridan to clearly communicate this would not be the case.

Taking one of the five PELA scripts, Catterick, the Academic Principal, and the ALL faculty member used the Feedback Tool to separately score the piece of writing. This was to test ‘inter-rater reliability’ (Cohen et al., 2018). There was consensus in the grading which gave us more confidence in our process, but the rubric wording was tweaked slightly after a discussion about terminology. Even though only one script was scored at this stage, the Feedback Tool was used to mark scripts on two more occasions before the compulsory rollout: training the Marker (see [Section 3.6](#)) and trialling the PELA on a new intake of students (see [Section 3.7](#)).

3.4. Developing the other discipline-specific Writing Tasks (February 18–June 5, 2020)

Using the Business PELA as a template, each Dean in the other three disciplines was asked to build a suitable diagnostic tool. The acting Dean of HASS had a draft script ready in February. Other faculty needed more time, until June. Helpful suggestions were offered regarding the selection of a topic, text, and title, as well as how to craft instructions for writing the three paragraphs. Each discipline-specific PELA tool was reviewed by members of the working committee, providing valuable input and helping to ensure consistency. Adjustments were made as needed.

Development is an ongoing process. We have just prepared a fifth Writing Task in anticipation of future Law students.

3.5. Creating materials for those relaying PELA scores to students (June 16–29, 2020)

Sheridan's PELA process was designed for Deans and/or designated faculty members (i.e. the Feedback Givers) to relay PELA results to individual students from their respective courses via a face-to-face meeting. To better facilitate this process, Catterick took the marked script and completed Feedback Tool of one student who sat the Pilot PELA (see [Section 3.3](#)) and, with the student's permission, used these to give her face-to-face feedback. The session was recorded, edited, and turned into a 13-minute-long training video for the Feedback Givers. Catterick wrote a step-by-step guide to synchronise with the recording and this guide has now been turned into a tick-the-box checklist to enable the Feedback Givers to grasp the information more immediately.

For postgraduate students, the relaying of their PELA scores can be done via an online platform. Undergraduate students are expected to physically attend their feedback session; failure to do so means forfeiting the right to see their marked PELA script and to receive their completed Feedback Tool.

3.6. Engaging the Marker and refining feedback materials (August 19–September 18, 2020)

With a new batch of students about to commence their studies, it was time to find and train a PELA Marker. Before leaving, Catterick had written instructions regarding how to grade a script and fill in the Feedback Tool. We approached a professional writer/lecturer on Sheridan staff to take on the role. The Academic Principal and the ALL faculty member (henceforth referred to as the PELA Coordinator) sat with her and, further testing inter-rater reliability, they all separately scored more scripts from the PELA Pilot. Again, consensus was strong, indicating high inter-rater reliability.

As Catterick, a TESOL specialist, was no longer the one interpreting the language to mark and give feedback, we discussed in more detail how each of us understood the rubric (or Feedback Tool). To add clarity, we incorporated *spelling* as part of the descriptors under *Lexical range and accuracy*. In addition, it was decided the PELA Coordinator would develop brief notes for the Feedback Givers explaining terminology such as *authorial voice* and *simple, compound, and complex sentences*, giving examples where necessary. We also included two boxes at the bottom of the Feedback Tool which, when ticked, indicate further action a student can take to improve (see paragraph 3 of [Section 3.11](#)).

Our Marker was keen to develop a colour-coding or annotation system to help Feedback Givers match her comments with examples in each script. She agreed to keep a log when annotating and marking, so we could track how long this process took, make any necessary changes, and compensate her for time spent. Having refined her skills, she now spends about 40 minutes per script. At this stage, the largest cohort taking the PELA in the same semester has been 18 students, so we have not yet needed a second Marker.

To attempt to mask gender and/or ethnicity, the PELA Coordinator numbers student scripts before the Marker receives them. No names are visible. We have also employed two specific strategies, as suggested by Cohen et al. (2018), to address possible inconsistency and unreliability in the marking process: having strong definitions around marking criteria and involving a moderator. Any scores determined *Poor* by the Marker are checked by the PELA Coordinator.

In the end, Sheridan's PELA is not a high stakes diagnostic tool. Students with weaker scores (i.e. one *P* score or two *S/P* scores) are simply encouraged to avail themselves of free support. As part of a larger cohort, they are already enrolled in a compulsory first-year research unit that focuses on academic literacies: part of our model for embedding necessary skills.

3.7. Trialling the PELA tool with a whole new cohort (August 27–September 25, 2020)

Sheridan was still operating on three semesters at this stage. To test the PELA diagnostic tool on a larger group, all incoming Trimester 3 students were invited to participate. Of the 20 newcomers, only nine chose to sit the PELA: seven BBus, one BA, and one Diploma of Arts (DipA). This meant only two out of the four available discipline-specific Writing Tasks were needed, Business and HASS, as students from other disciplines were not represented. Eleven of the 20 incoming students were only taking one unit and chose not to participate in the trial.

The PELA rollout was generating a lot of electronic documents. To aid with tracking, the Academic Principal created new colour-coded Writing Tasks and Answer Booklets. These matched the four disciplines: Business, Education, HASS, and Mathematics and Sciences. She also produced a template for the Invigilator's Report with a colour-coded box next to a student's name and number, showing which faculty they belong to. This highlights how many Feedback Givers from each discipline will be needed. To facilitate efficiency of process, the PELA Coordinator designed tick-the-box checklists for the roles of Coordinator/Invigilator, Academic Principal, Marker, and Feedback Givers.

Evaluating the PELA process is essential. As part of this trial, all students and staff involved in the process were sent a link inviting them to complete an anonymous, electronic survey. In the first section, participants clicked on one or more boxes indicating what role they played (e.g. "I took the PELA," "I marked the scripts"). In the second section, they typed in answers to questions regarding their perceptions of what did and did not go well. They also suggested how the process could be improved. Our PELA Survey Facilitator continues to survey participants after each PELA sitting, gathering feedback to help shape our processes.

3.8. Rolling out the compulsory PELA tool (January 18, 2021–ongoing)

Trimester 1 of 2021 brought us 11 incoming students for whom the PELA was compulsory. Seven were taking Business (one postgraduate and six undergraduates), one was studying a BA, and three were in the MED program. With real-world constraints kicking in, it took five separate sittings of the PELA to accommodate all new students. We have learned to build this flexibility into the first few weeks of a new term.

Currently, our PELA tool (a paper-based, face-to-face assessment) is administered on campus during Orientation Week. Students who miss Orientation due to sickness or a late arrival, for example, are given an opportunity to take the PELA during Weeks 1–2. Postgraduate students are offered time slots that better fit in with their schedules. On the day of sitting, students are reminded why the PELA is being administered and are assured the results do not affect their enrolment status. The invigilator (the PELA Coordinator) explains how and when the PELA will be marked as well as how the feedback process works. Any questions are answered before the assessment begins. Students are sometimes surprised they cannot access a dictionary or translation services but are reminded there is a glossary, providing definitions of some of the discipline-specific words appearing in the reading passage. The cover page of the Answer Booklet contains a consent box. Students sign if they are comfortable with their anonymous script being used to train other faculty members, and the PELA Coordinator keeps a record of who has agreed. In another attempt to increase reliability, Sheridan's PELA is usually invigilated by the same person: the PELA Coordinator. This is to ensure consistency with regards to operational procedures (Cohen et al., 2018). On the rare occasion when the Academic Principal invigilates, the same checklist of instructions is followed.

3.9. Documenting processes, storing materials, and evaluating (ongoing)

Our PELA cycle (see [Appendix A](#)), monitored by the PELA Coordinator, begins several weeks before Orientation. As mentioned previously, each faculty member involved in the process also has a more detailed checklist pertinent to their role. All PELA materials, including our policy and student results, are stored on a Canvas page. To maintain confidentiality, only a few have access

to this site: the Executive Principal, the Academic Principal, the PELA Coordinator, and the Marker. Suggestions from surveys are collated and discussed. Necessary changes are made, documents are updated, and the PELA Coordinator communicates these modifications to the relevant parties.

3.10. Outlining the benefits of a face-to-face PELA

A face-to-face PELA process does have some advantages. We believe having a student physically sit the assessment helps to mitigate any cheating that might occur in an online environment. It is interesting to note that, after a period of running online exams (prompted by the onset of the COVID pandemic), Sydney University is now returning to an on-campus, face-to-face delivery model – mainly to combat the excessive use of “banned materials and devices” during online testing (Carroll, 2022, para. 1). Moreover, with the fast-moving availability of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), through such Large Language Models (LLMs) as ChatGPT which can be used to produce chunks of text in a matter of seconds (AAIN Generative AI Working Group, 2023), it is imperative to verify the authenticity of a student’s piece of work. On rare occasions, the Academic Principal has used a student’s PELA script to verify authorial voice (or lack of) in another submitted assessment.

Quite often, it has been the students, themselves, who have commented on the usefulness of the paper-based PELA tool. During the 50 minutes of handwriting, some have realised how dependent they have become on word processing programs. Sheridan’s exams are all paper based at this stage, so having a written PELA helps them experience what their exams may entail. Just sitting a PELA has motivated some students to seek help with their academic writing skills. They have commented on two realisations: it has been a long time since they have written anything academic, and that they are reliant on external dictionaries and editing programs. Consequently, some ask for help even before the PELA script is marked and scores are shared.

It has also been advantageous for Deans and/or designated lecturers to relay PELA results to students via a face-to-face meeting. Although time consuming, it sends a powerful message when the Deans are the ones offering praise, communicating language expectations, asking students to reflect on their part in the development of academic literacies, directing students to support resources, and creating space for dialogue. This upskilling of Feedback Givers in metalanguage and resource awareness is perhaps a smaller-scale version of what Podorova (2016) provides through her ALF Toolkit.

3.11. Embedding academic literacy support (January 25, 2021–ongoing)

Prior to Trimester 1 of 2021, Sheridan’s academic literacy support was delivered through a series of compulsory, non-credit workshops run by the ALL faculty member. Students needed to attend and complete the in-class assessments to graduate. Some did not participate until their last trimester, limiting the effectiveness of the support. Then, in early 2020 when PELA possibilities were being explored, the working committee decided to repurpose the workshops. A compulsory, credit-bearing foundational research unit was designed and rolled out at the beginning of 2021, along with second- and third-year counterparts. The two latter units have been tweaked a few times to avoid an overlap of content. These three units spearhead our approach to embedding academic literacies, undergirding a student for the duration of their studies. Each research unit is delivered by an experienced faculty member who teaches students how to write in discipline-specific genres, as recommended by Wingate (2016).

In the foundational research unit, students examine the components involved in writing essays, case studies, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, and research reports. Through smaller (5%), almost weekly, formative homework assignments, they develop and practise key skills such as: finding a relevant article via databases, drawing a mind map, finding their own voice through personal reflection, doing in-text citations, building a reference list, completing a matrix reflecting similarities and differences between arguments, and synthesising these arguments into a

paragraph. In this way, a range of academic literacies are covered (see Murray & Nallaya, 2016, for a sample list). As well as a numerical score, students receive written feedback on each of these smaller assessments, outlining whether they stayed on track with the task, what they did well, and how they might improve – reflecting components of Dunworth and Sanchez’s (2016) three dimensions that signal quality feedback. In addition, written comments from the lecturer are often discussed in class, creating an interactive element. Delivering feedback throughout the unit is an essential part of the academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 2006). The larger, summative assessments in this foundational research unit (i.e. an essay, an oral presentation, and an exam) require students to apply earlier-acquired skills.

Instruction in this unit also explicitly links in with the key areas listed on the PELA Feedback Tool (i.e. *Purpose, Argument, Referencing, Structure, Grammatical accuracy, and Lexical range and accuracy*). *Write Well* resources, electronic and paper based, have been built around these themes – and are used in class. Students are directed to these resources when receiving their PELA results. While taking this first-year unit, they are also reminded of other available support: a weekly, on-campus Editing Workshop – where they can receive oral feedback on a piece of writing – and the option of a one-on-one appointment: both handled by the PELA Coordinator.

Strengths of this first-year unit have been described in these ways by students completing the anonymous unit survey:

- “every week [we] learn a small part and then apply it to the essay and the exam”
- “group work, presentation, and weekly homeworks [sic]”
- “how to research, APA 7 training, public speaking, academic language, organising ideas”
- “being able to structure my writing, being able to know different types of nonverbal communication”
- “referencing and plagiarism – unfortunately until now, no other previous institutes have ever given me feedback on results and pointed out plagiarism. I did used [sic] to get less marks but always wondered why. I would just receive results with less marks and I was always unsure about what plagiarism is and kept copying from other sources without proper references.”

Reporting on how the lecturer helped them in this unit, students replied with:

- “providing clear feedback, indicating the key areas that would need to be reviewed, providing addition [sic] resources ..., connecting us to the librarian who assisted with research advise [sic] and resources”
- “I learned so much about the subject and myself. [The lecturer] gave me a lot of strength and encouragement to achieve higher than I thought possible.”
- “I improved my academic writing drastically.”

Lastly, regarding explicit teaching on genres (in this case, the Literature Review), one of the students commented:

- “Now I understand how to organise my writing around themes. I can see now that I’m capable of doing a Masters and a PhD!”

In the second-year research unit, students actively walk through the research process. The lecturer has a record of the research areas faculty are competent to supervise in, and students are encouraged to design a project they are interested in which matches faculty expertise. At this stage, they are formally guided by the unit lecturer but are encouraged to chat with other staff to help clarify their topic. The challenge for everyone is to recognise that “research can be scaled down” to fit the semester schedule (Joubert et al., 2022, Slide 23). This unit is highly scaffolded with a teach-then-do pattern. For example, after the workshop on how to do a Literature Review, students go away and complete this step of their project before receiving guidance on the next phase. Lecturer

feedback is mostly written although students can book a time to discuss their project to engage in more interactive feedback.

For the third-year research unit, students are assigned a relevant faculty member as their supervisor. They meet weekly with this lecturer but are expected to manage their time and the research process more independently. They can further develop the project they designed in their second year or start with a completely new topic. Feedback to students is both written and oral. The weekly supervisor-student meetings are especially dialogic (Ajjawi & Boud, 2018). Other faculty members are also invited to give both oral and written feedback on class presentations to feed forward into students' final written reports. This feedback has a particularly collegial flavour, celebrating the progress students have made.

3.12. Facing challenges

With the rollout of the compulsory PELA, some logistical problems surfaced regarding enrolments. Six existing students had either a timetable clash or no room in their program to immediately accommodate the new foundational research unit. They were encouraged to engage with the *Write Well* support resources and Editing workshops, and they did so towards the end of the teaching block. The following trimester, three of the six took up the new first-year unit; the other three were exempt.

With regards to the Editing Workshops, low student engagement has been a concern. Possible reasons for this are: work commitments, weariness, help being received elsewhere, or the fact that we already trouble-shoot writing issues in the foundational research unit. Further investigation would be helpful. Students do, however, initiate one-on-one appointments with the PELA Coordinator for academic writing support.

Another challenge has been the steady wave of student nervousness before each PELA sitting. The messaging in Sheridan's pre-enrolment information package and entry interview describes the PELA as a diagnostic tool. However, prior to Orientation, there are always students contacting Sheridan asking how they can study for it. Some obviously see it is an exam to be conquered. This is disconcerting as there is no penalty associated with a lower score; students are simply directed to any necessary support. To help address student fears, we recently recorded a two-minute video clip – stating what the PELA tool is and is not – which will be available to next semester's cohort.

In terms of delivering PELA results to students, initially all Deans agreed with the face-to-face model. Despite that, when the reality of scheduling and conducting these meetings was realised, one Dean argued for a complete online PELA process. Our commitment to face-to-face delivery prevailed, but getting PELA results to students within a reasonable time frame has sometimes been difficult. During the WA COVID lockdowns, Sheridan was forced into a few weeks of online learning. Unlike other campuses, we were quickly able to return to our physical campus. However, soon after, some faculty members and students caught COVID, so there were delays in delivering PELA scores. This may have delayed meaningful intervention. Also, the COVID effect pushed the evaluation survey into the tail end of the semester when students had mostly forgot about their Orientation experience. To speed up the process of getting results to students, we recently trained two more lecturers as Feedback Givers. In this way, no faculty member has more than four students to follow up. The evaluation survey is now sent out during Weeks 5 to 6.

A continual frustration amongst staff has been the number of PELA sittings required to accommodate latecomers. Usually, there is a need to administer the PELA tool more than once for undergraduates who miss the scheduled Orientation. In these instances, if the PELA Coordinator is unavailable, the Academic Principal invigilates. Postgraduate students either take the PELA after their evening Orientation, which can make it a long day, or schedule an alternative time. Offering the PELA online would solve these issues, but we are not yet willing to make that compromise.

Because of our face-to-face model, our PELA process demands more from our staff – both in terms of how PELA scores are delivered and with how academic literacies are embedded through the compulsory research units. For instance, almost every lecturer is involved in supervising one or more students when final research projects are undertaken. This is a challenge, and building sustainability in this area will continue to be so as student enrolments increase.

4. Recommendations for further development and research

Although most faculty are involved at some stage with the PELA process, we have relied on those teaching the research units to explicitly unpack different genres in class. There has been no formalised, across-campus training regarding academic literacies and how they might be embedded. Currently, the Learning and Teaching Committee audits units, checking for alignment between course and learning outcomes and respective assessments and rubrics. In collaboration with the Deans, the committee could add another layer of scrutiny and, following Murray and Nallaya's (2016) example, map the academic literacies covered in each unit (see their Appendix 1 for a sample list). Consequently, unnecessary repetition and/or gaps could be identified and scaffolding of a range of literacies be addressed. Staff could be further upskilled through Sheridan's regular Professional Development workshops. Regarding staff development, our PELA process relies heavily on the PELA Coordinator, who oversees the PELA cycle, facilitates the weekly Editing Workshops, gives one-on-one support via appointments, and teaches the foundational research unit. As covering all these elements is a huge task, we need to train more people in this role to spread the work around.

Research into Sheridan's current feedback practices would also be informative. Our PELA process gives opportunities for rich interaction between staff and students (and students to peers), and it would be helpful to monitor and improve this. We may not be fully capturing the dimensions that reflect quality feedback, as presented in the literature (e.g. Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Ajjawi & Boud, 2018), or be shaping our teaching practices based on student response to feedback. To help identify any required improvements, there should be more room for dialogue. On this point, since there has been low student engagement with the Editing Workshops, it is important to formally ask students why. This could be coupled with an investigation into how they perceive their responsibility in the development of academic literacy.

Another area for consideration is assessing whether our PELA is really measuring what we designed it to (Cohen et al., 2018). This concern arises because Knoch and Elder (2013) state the PELA validation process may be less professional with in-house design and offer a complete framework for evaluating validity – covering goals, assumptions and interpretation of scores, warrants, and the kind of evidence needed to verify or falsify such warrants. A starting place would be to test two major inferences: that PELA consequences and decisions benefit all stakeholders and that “score-based decisions are appropriate and well communicated” (Knoch & Elder, 2013, p. 55). The validity of our PELA tool could also be tested by comparing each incoming, undergraduate student's PELA Feedback Tool with the written essay they submit for the foundational research unit. This would be possible because the PELA Feedback Tool is also used as the marking rubric for the essay. In this way, we could track whether students are improving through the intervention of the first-year research unit and better test the validity of our diagnostic tool.

5. Conclusion

This paper has provided a possible road map for a smaller campus by detailing the process Sheridan has used in rolling out a PELA. After considering reasons for a PELA and different types of PELA tools, it explored how others are embedding academic literacies and engaging in quality feedback practices. More specifically, it dealt with the challenges Sheridan has faced throughout its PELA journey as a small, face-to-face campus when COVID was prevalent. The highlight has been explaining the unique way Sheridan embeds academic literacies through three core research

units. Suggestions have been made for further development and research whereby the use of academic literacies is audited, more faculty are upskilled in their embedding, greater dialogic feedback is realised, and the validity of the PELA tool and process is further tested. These steps would lead us forward as an institution.

Appendix A: An Overview of Sheridan's PELA Cycle

In the following tables, the feedback stages have been grouped after the other stages, even though the various stages are interleaved.

Week/s	Stage of Cycle	Glossary
Pre-Orienta- tion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The PELA Coordinator trains faculty members who are new to any PELA roles. The PELA Coordinator checks that all incoming students have been sent information regarding the PELA diagnostic tool. 	<p>PELA Coordinator: The faculty member who oversees the whole PELA process.</p> <p>This person is our Academic Language and Learning (ALL) faculty member.</p>
Orienta- tion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students sit the face-to-face PELA under the guidance of an Invigilator. 	<p>Invigilator: The faculty member who supervises the assessment. For us, this is either the PELA Coordinator or the Academic Principal.</p>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The PELA Coordinator passes the PELA scripts to the Marker. 	<p>Marker: The faculty member who marks the PELA scripts and fills in the Feedback Tool/Rubric for each student. Due to a smaller student population, we have only one person currently fulfilling this role.</p>
1–15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The three undergraduate research units begin. These form an essential part of how Sheridan embeds academic literacy. 	<p>Research unit: A compulsory unit (worth three credit points) where students explore different writing genres (first year) and complete a research project (second and third year).</p>
1–15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ALL faculty member (in our case the PELA Coordinator) starts facilitating a weekly, face-to-face Editing Workshop. Students are reminded that one-on-one appointments are available with the ALL faculty member (in our case the PELA Coordinator) for continued academic writing support. 	<p>Editing Workshop: A scheduled time (three hours) and place on campus where students can bring a piece of work to receive feedback from the PELA Coordinator.</p>
1–15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are given access to the <i>Write Well</i> resources that match the PELA categories on the Feedback Tool. These resources are used in class during the first-year research unit. 	<p><i>Write Well:</i> The name of the electronic and written academic writing support resources.</p>

Week/s	Feedback Stages of Cycle	Glossary
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback Givers set up an appointment with each student allocated to them. Usually no more than four students are allocated to any one Feedback Giver. 	Feedback Givers: The School Deans (and/or assigned faculty members) who walk students through their marked PELA script and completed Feedback Tool/Rubric (see Appendix C).
2–3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback Givers meet with their allocated students to share PELA results and to discuss if ongoing support of any kind (especially academic writing) is needed. This is a face-to-face meeting for undergraduate students; postgraduate students have an on-line option. The date and time of the meeting is noted, to track which students have received feedback. Students take away a copy of the completed Feedback Tool but not of the marked PELA script. 	
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The PELA Coordinator scans and saves all relevant PELA documents; hard copies are given to the Academic Principal for safekeeping. 	
5–6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The PELA Coordinator sends the email addresses of those involved in the PELA process (i.e. students, Student Services, and faculty members) to the Survey Facilitator. An online survey is sent out to help evaluate the PELA process. 	Survey Facilitator: The faculty member who emails the online survey to all those involved in the PELA process.
7–8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The PELA Coordinator collates the survey results from those involved in the PELA process (i.e. students, Student Services, and faculty members). Based on the survey results, the PELA process is reviewed. 	
9–15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The PELA Coordinator, in conjunction with the Academic Principal, makes any necessary changes to documents and/or the PELA process. The PELA Coordinator communicates any changes to relevant stakeholders. 	

Appendix B: Questions Regarding a PELA Rollout

Part A

1. What are the main drivers for a PELA rollout at Sheridan?
2. How would the potential benefits of PELA be described to Sheridan staff?
3. To what extent has there been an accounting made for the resource inputs connected with the ongoing delivery of PELA and the concomitant support provision?
4. How close to current perceived best practice does the Sheridan PELA need to be?

Part B

1. How would the PELA be delivered?
2. How long would the PELA be?
3. To what extent would the PELA be mandatory for incoming students?
4. When would the PELA be administered?
5. Would the PELA be designed to assess just academic writing skills, both academic reading and writing skills, or all six skills (i.e. Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, Grammar, [and] Vocabulary)?
6. How would students receive feedback on their PELA performance?
7. Who would create the PELA and over what time period? (D. Catterick, personal communication, February 3, 2020)

Appendix C: Sheridan's Current PELA Feedback Tool¹

For the Marker to fill in:	For the Coordinator to fill in:	
Student's Allocated Number:	Student's Name:	Student's ID Number:

	G = GOOD	S = SATISFACTORY	P = POOR
Purpose <input type="checkbox"/> Mark	<input type="checkbox"/> Paragraphs clearly on task <input type="checkbox"/> Paragraph lengths more than 75 words	<input type="checkbox"/> Paragraphs sometimes on task, but greater attention to following instructions advised <input type="checkbox"/> Paragraph lengths around 75 words	<input type="checkbox"/> Paragraphs often not on task; attention to following instructions needed <input type="checkbox"/> Paragraph lengths under 75 words
Argument <input type="checkbox"/> Mark	<input type="checkbox"/> Authorial voice clear <input type="checkbox"/> Personal views given when needed <input type="checkbox"/> Views supported with relevant, well-articulated arguments <input type="checkbox"/> Implications or objections to arguments used where relevant	<input type="checkbox"/> Authorial voice identifiable <input type="checkbox"/> Personal views sometimes given when needed <input type="checkbox"/> Views supported with relevant arguments, but could be better articulated	<input type="checkbox"/> Authorial voice often unclear <input type="checkbox"/> Personal views often not given when needed <input type="checkbox"/> Views often not supported by relevant arguments or the given arguments difficult to follow
Referencing <input type="checkbox"/> Mark	<input type="checkbox"/> Quote (direct or indirect) incorporated effectively <input type="checkbox"/> In-text citation complete with all elements	<input type="checkbox"/> Quote (direct or indirect) incorporated <input type="checkbox"/> In-text citation attempted, but some elements missing	<input type="checkbox"/> Quote (direct or indirect) missing <input type="checkbox"/> Quote (direct or indirect) present, but does not support writing <input type="checkbox"/> In-text citation not attempted

¹ Note: Copyright by Dench and Tognini (2022, July 8) adapted from Catterick (2020).

	G = GOOD	S = SATISFACTORY	P = POOR
Structure <input type="checkbox"/> Mark	Paragraphs <input type="checkbox"/> Topic sentences used well <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting sentences well developed <input type="checkbox"/> Organisation/flow of thoughts clear	Paragraphs <input type="checkbox"/> Topic sentences attempted <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting sentences attempted <input type="checkbox"/> Organisation of thoughts attempted	Paragraphs <input type="checkbox"/> Topic sentences missing or ineffective <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting sentences missing or ineffective <input type="checkbox"/> Organisation/flow of thoughts poor
Structure <input type="checkbox"/> Mark	Sentences <input type="checkbox"/> Simple, compound, and complex sentences present <input type="checkbox"/> Fragments and/or rambling sentences rarely used <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuation errors absent or rare	Sentences <input type="checkbox"/> Simple and compound sentences present <input type="checkbox"/> Fragments and/or rambling sentences sometimes used <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuation errors sometimes occur	Sentences <input type="checkbox"/> Simple sentences overused <input type="checkbox"/> Fragments and/or rambling sentences often used <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuation errors frequent
Grammatical accuracy <input type="checkbox"/> Mark	<input type="checkbox"/> Grammatical errors absent <input type="checkbox"/> Grammatical errors few and readability not affected	<input type="checkbox"/> Grammatical errors sometimes occur and may affect readability	<input type="checkbox"/> Grammatical errors frequent <input type="checkbox"/> Grammatical errors affect readability and comprehension
Lexical range and accuracy <input type="checkbox"/> Mark	<input type="checkbox"/> Formal, academic language used <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline-specific vocabulary used <input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary range relatively wide <input type="checkbox"/> Words/word forms used in the correct context <input type="checkbox"/> Spelling errors absent or rare	<input type="checkbox"/> Formal, academic language often used <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline-specific vocabulary sometimes used <input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary range adequate <input type="checkbox"/> Words/word forms sometimes used incorrectly but readability not affected <input type="checkbox"/> Spelling errors sometimes occur	<input type="checkbox"/> Formal, academic language rarely used <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline-specific vocabulary missing or rarely used <input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary range limited <input type="checkbox"/> Words/word forms often used incorrectly and readability affected <input type="checkbox"/> Spelling errors frequent

Did the student write three paragraphs?

If not, discuss the reasons why the PELA was incomplete.

It is recommended this student:

- attends the free **Write Well Editing Workshops** on campus
- reads the relevant documents (**Write Well** Canvas page or **Write Well** booklet)

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