University English language assessment: What's going wrong, why, and is there a solution?

WARWICK

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The context… An Australian sojourn

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What are gatekeeping tests?

- Tests used by universities, pre-enrolment, to determine students' competency in English and whether that competency is sufficient to meet the language demands of their future studies (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL, PTE)
- Tests used by universities, post-enrolment, to determine students' access, to English language development opportunities

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Today's HE context (1)

- Globalization of higher education; increased student mobility
- Increasingly large international student cohorts, for the majority of whom English is not their native tongue
- Ever-developing technologies for programme delivery → diversification of audience/std demographic

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Today's HE context (2)

- Rise of the social justice agenda (widening participation/increasing access)
- Funding:
  - Student fees (increasing international student numbers) – expected return on investment – pressure to pass them
  - Students as clients – 'the student experience' – league tables etc.
  - Research income, international collaborations

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And the common denominator is?

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English language competence as a growing issue

Many students still struggle with language despite meeting EL entry requirements.

Internationalisation in itself is absolutely necessary for any modern university - however, this is not at any cost.

(Study conducted by BBC News, 2012)

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Specific challenges have been identified with regard to the admission of students with English-language skills that are either insufficient to deal with the demands of their programme of study or have the potential to have a detrimental effect on the learning experience of all students. (QAA 2009, p. 2).

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Insufficient language competence has implications for:

- Students, both native and non-native students (Student Barometer – student experience, multicultural group work)
- Academic staff
- ELT units and resources supporting their work
- Future employees and professional organisations
- Graduating universities

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The response …

Moves toward regulation:

- UK QAA (Quality Assurance Agency)
- UKVI (although questionable motivation)
- Australia's DEEWR: Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities → TEQSA's 'Standards'

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Are gatekeeping tests fit for purpose? (1)

- Multiple pathways (i.e. it's not always the test!) Coley (1999) cites 61 'pieces of evidence' of language proficiency
- Either GTs are not testing what they need to be testing or are being abused by users. Abuse can result from the desire not to be out of kilter with competitors → How do universities set standards and what levels of assessment literacy exist? …
- … The need to track student performance
- Security issues
- The test practice effect
- The 'validity of equivalence tables'

Are gatekeeping tests fit for purpose? (2)

What is proficiency?

- General proficiency
- English for general academic purposes
- Academic literacy
- Professional communication skills

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General proficiency

… those skills that furnish the individual with the capacity to negotiate the demands of everyday communication in social contexts. It takes as its starting point the notion of communicative competence and refers to a set of generic skills and abilities broadly captured in frameworks of communicative competence such as those described above and reflected in tuition that focuses on areas including grammar and syntax, general listening skills, vocabulary development, general reading and writing skills, the development of communication strategies and fluency, and the pragmatics of communication and associated concerns with politeness, implicature and inference.

English for general academic purposes (EGAP)

EGAP is characterized by the generic academic English preparation found in both pre-university courses as well as many post-entry in-sessional programmes, and it focuses on common academic vocabulary, genres, tasks, and communicative conventions. It has a cross-disciplinary focus designed to provide students with a broad understanding of the principles of language use that apply to most, if not all, academic disciplines, and typically prioritizes the arts and humanities and social science disciplines over the pure sciences.

(Murray, 2019)

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Academic Literacy

…students' conversancy in the particular set of literacy practices relevant to the discipline area within which their course of study is located and which will embody particular conventions and discourses.

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Although there is an argument for saying that proficiency is part of academic literacy and should therefore be developed within that framework, there is also a rationale for distinguishing the two: Even if their language exhibits dialectal forms not in sync with academic and professional standards and expectations, ESB students are, by definition, fully proficient, yet they share a need with NESB students for academic literacy tuition … This fact implies a different if related set of abilities underlying proficiency and academic literacy.

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Academic literacies: examples

Preparing an OHS business case

Writing nursing handover notes

Taking notes in clinical placements

Writing a business report

Writing an aviation case study essay

Report writing for social work placement

Writing case records

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Professional communication skills

The skills and strategies needed to communicate effectively in the workplace:

- Intercultural competence
- Cultural relativistic orientation
- Interpersonal skills
- Conversancy in the discourses and behaviours associated with particular domains
- Non-verbal communication skills

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And what of ‘study skills’?

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... not essentially connected with language but instead with the organizational and strategic dimensions of learning in general … As such, they promote behaviours for improving effectiveness and efficiency in learning by focusing on such elements as time management, test-taking strategies, motivational techniques, the use of library resources, accessing materials online, independent learning, reading techniques, efficient note-taking, and memorization techniques.

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What are Pre-enrolment GTs testing? …

English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)

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The problem…

- GAP does not prepare students adequately to study within their disciplines.
- 'Academic literacies' – each discipline has associated with it a particular set of literacies in which students need to become conversant → membership of its community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
- Thus GTs have limited functionality as gatekeeping mechanisms.
- Simply increasing IELTS requirements will not solve problem.

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In-sessional support

The problem continues with the nature of in-sessional provision offered to students.

Repeat of IELTS/TOEFL-style EGAP instead of discipline-specific language students require for coursework/exams.

→ High attrition rates (Lobo & Gurney, 2014)

Will testing bodies change their tests?

- Concerted, collective and coordinated pressure would need to be exerted by the HE sector
- → More discipline-focused tests
- This is unlikely. The HE sector and testing organisations (IELTS/ETS/Pearson) too invested

So what can we do post-enrolment?

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English language support

- Embed academic literacies in the disciplines to be taught by academic staff (Lecture 2)
- They are fundamental to the disciplines, not an optional extra
- We can no longer make assumptions about the knowledge and skills with which students enter university (internat. + WP cohorts – learning through osmosis for 4%)

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Post-enrolment language Assessment (PELA)

Why have PELA?

- GKTs not functioning sufficiently
- NESB students are sometimes classified as ‘domestic’
- Students enter via various pathways and with various test scores (Coley, 1999 – 61 ‘pieces of evidence’ of EL proficiency) → questions of ‘equivalence’.
- To help ensure students comprehend what is being imparted by content lecturers teaching academic literacy
- To determine who should get access to which (limited) English language resources

What should PELA assess?

- General proficiency
- Academic literacy will be embedded in the curriculum

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Who should PELA assess?

- All newly-enrolled students? (Note: the increasing needs of ESB students)
- Those below a set proficiency threshold?
- All international students? (BUT what of NESB stds who register as domestic?)
- Those with foreign-sounding names? (Issues of equity/prejudice/stigmatisation)

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How should PELA assess?

- The instrument:
  - A test?
  - A piece of assessed coursework?
  - Other?
- The means (administration):
  - Electronically
  - Manually
- Logistical issues re administering and marking
- When to assess?

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Other PELA considerations

- Screening Vs diagnostic
- Securing compliance - Should assessment be optional or mandatory? If mandatory how do you secure compliance?
- How the institution positions itself
- Threat to business / losing edge over competitor institutions
- Sending out conflicting messages

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PELA as a vehicle for rationalising limited resources

- *One-to-one consultations with a Language and Learning Advisor*
- *Feedback on assignments*
- *Cycle of Workshops*
- *Online resources*
- *Credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing proficiency courses as negotiated with relevant Programme Directors*
- *Intensive teaching break programmes, on general proficiency and academic literacy*

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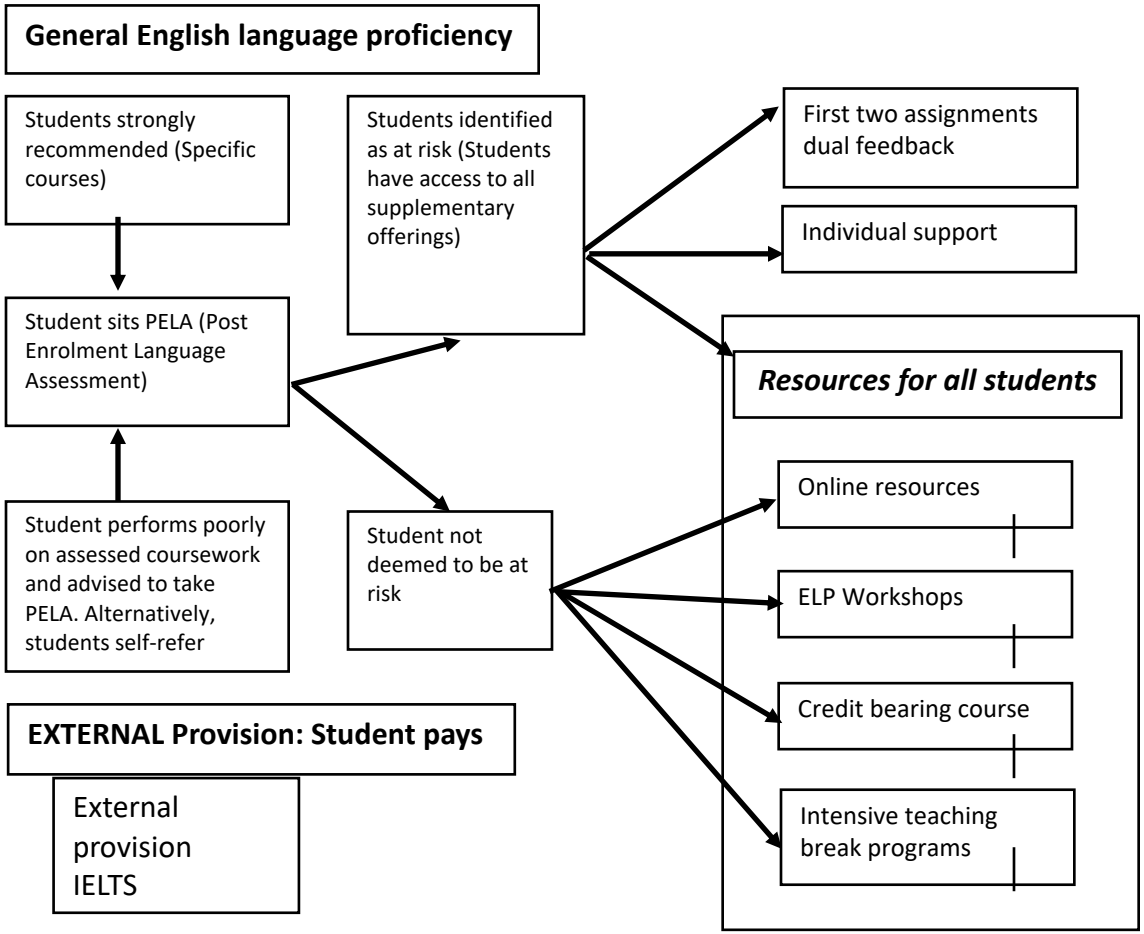

For All Students

Academic Literacy
(Academic Literacies embedded and assessed within the curriculum)

Professional Communication Skills
(Embedded and assessed within the curriculum, as essential graduate attributes)

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From the ideal to reality

- The challenges of embedding ALs in the curriculum (Lecture 2)
- Implications for the structure of provision: establishing a compromise

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