



DELA Faculty Usage Report 2008

Overview of DELA

The Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) is offered during orientation and the first weeks of semester as a formal means of identifying students early who may be at risk because of their language skills. It is comprised of three subtests – reading, writing and listening – and takes approximately two hours to complete. Although faculties refer students who do not meet certain language thresholds (eg 7 IELTS) to take up DELA, there is no University requirement that students do so, with the exception of certain cohorts.¹ It is worth noting that as of 2009, DELA will be compulsory for all undergraduate students who achieve less than 7 IELTS or equivalent.

Funded primarily for international students, DELA is also available to those local non-native English speaking (NNES) students identified by faculties as potentially in need of further language development, namely a score less than 35 on the VCE ESL examination (see Appendix A for minimum thresholds in 2008).

DELA is co-administered by the Academic Skills Unit (ASU) and the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) and funded centrally through the Office of the Provost. The ASU is responsible for university-wide coordination: faculty liaison and promotion and student-facing information, including dissemination of results and recommendations. The ASU also maintains the DELA database, [ADAM \(Automated DELA Assessment Module\)](#). The LTRC is responsible for test development, validation, invigilation and scoring as well as for advice on score meaning and general policy matters. Both the ASU and the LTRC meet regularly to coordinate the DELA and respond to university practices and policy, as appropriate.

DELA uptake 2008

In 2008, the number of students taking up DELA decreased by 12%, following the trend from the previous year in which participation also dropped (by 8% over 2006 statistics). Interestingly, the decrease occurs in semester 1 as compared to semester 2, in which more students took up DELA than in 2007. It is worth noting that the target figure of 1200 students, for which funding has been allocated (\$70,000.00) has never been reached (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: DELA uptake by year

Year:	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003 ²	2002	2001
Semester 1:	442	549	593	486	581	346	384	432
Semester 2:	196	175	193	168	178	208	199	83
Total:	638	724	786	654	768	554	583	515

The Faculties of Economics and Commerce (FEC); Engineering; and Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) continue to be the highest users of DELA at 30%, 20%, and 14% respectively. FEC has the largest percentage of international students and both Engineering and MDHS have compulsory language testing, which most likely explains these figures. Of the total number of students who sat DELA, 47% were undergraduate and 53% were graduate. These statistics represent a significant change over previous years in which undergraduate students were in the majority (eg 60% in 2007).

¹ Postgraduate students in Engineering may be accepted at .5 below the recommended IELTS if they take up the postgraduate ESL credit subject (DELA required); students in MDHS are referred to sit DELA after screening for language proficiency.

² Statistics for 2003, 2002 and 2001 do not include students from Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences.

Tables 2 and 3 represent the breakdown of students sitting DELA by Faculty and cohort respectively.

Table 2: DELA uptake by Faculty

Faculty	Semester 1	Semester 2	Total
ABP	26	11	37
Arts	38	17	55
FEC	108	86	194
Education	16	2	18
Engineering	79	46	125
Land/Environment	2	0	2
Law	31	17	48
MDHS	86	2	88
Music	5	0	5
Science	39	12	51
MSGR	10	2	12
Vet Science	0	1	1
VCA	2	0	2
Total	442	196	638

Table 3: DELA uptake by cohort

Faculty	Undergraduate	Graduate	Total
ABP	31	6	37
Arts	28	27	55
FEC	84	110	194
Education	3	15	18
Engineering	30	95	125
Land/Environment	0	2	2
Law	2	46	76
MDHS	68	20	88
Music	3	2	5
Science	47	4	51
MSGR	0	12	12
Vet Science	0	1	1
VCA	1	1	2
Total	297	341	638

Student results 2008

Of the 638 students who sat DELA, 478 or 75% scored '4' or less on Writing (Form), which has been the default indicator of a student's overall academic language proficiency for success at the tertiary level, largely because students are assessed on their written output. A '4' or less on Writing (Form) on a 6-point scale has been considered significant enough to recommend the student for follow up English language support, regardless of other sub-skills scores, resulting in perhaps a higher incidence of referral to support. In 2009, the formula for computing DELA results will change to a weighted version based on advice by the LTRC (see *Changes in DELA score calculations* below) and in response to the University's new policy on language testing under the Melbourne Model.

Deleted: sub skill

New directions: implementing the language policy for 2009

Preparing for the implementation in 2009 of the University's policy on compulsory language testing and follow up support dominated DELA administration in 2008 in the following ways:

- Developing effective communication strategies to inform for both students and staff
- Determining relevant language support for each undergraduate course
- Reviewing the DELA formula for calculating scores and elaborating the skills' profiles for students feedback purposes

- Developing efficient systems to manage identification of students required to sit DELA and reporting of their results
- Reviewing University funding for DELA.

Communication

Information about the new language policy and DELA as a diagnostic tool was integrated into the training provided by the ASU to student advisers and enquiries officers through the auspices of the Student Advice Program. In addition, the following communication strategies were implemented:

- Development of a DELA website comprised of the University's policy, explanation of scores, table of language equivalencies, DELA orientation timetable, faculty designated DELA contacts and language support providers
- National and International Admissions dissemination of new policy to schools and overseas agents
- New policy included on 'Future Students' website
- Regular updates via the ASU DELA email circular and the Student Services Network, as well as through the Academic Programs Management Unit
- DELA information in both undergraduate and graduate orientation programs
- Direct faculty communication to identified students, either via letter, email or face to face communication (eg at Academic Advice Day).

Despite the above-mentioned strategies, anecdotal evidence throughout 2008 suggests that information is not always getting to front line staff within the student centres, which may affect uptake of DELA advice and hence the capacity of students to develop their English language skills to an appropriate level.

Language support

Under the new policy, faculties were given the authority to determine the nature of English language support for their students, in particular how the support could fit within a student's degree structure and be adequately resourced. The Steering Committee on integrating language and disciplinary teaching provided a comprehensive list of the options available to faculties, including credit subjects and adjunct programs, amongst others (see Appendix C). Consultations were also held with faculties by the various support providers, both university-wide and faculty-specific, over the course of 2008. Each faculty confirmed their language support program by November, ensuring tailored recommendations could be configured in the DELA database upon redevelopment.

Change in DELA score calculations

Upon advice from the LTRC and in discussion with key stakeholders (School of Language and Linguistics, Academic Programs Management Unit and ASU), a new formula for calculating DELA results was determined: each sub-skill (reading, writing and listening) would be weighted equally, and the overall mean used to determine the level of support as follows:

- 3.3 or less out of a total of 6: required to take up support
- 3.4 – 4 inclusive: recommended to take up support
- 4.1 – 6: no recommendation for further language study.

In addition, more fine-tuned descriptors have been developed for each score in each sub-skill (see Appendix B), providing both the student and faculty staff with a more informative assessment of language skills and how they are likely to impact on learning within a tertiary environment.

Effective online systems to support DELA: Student Systems Project and Automated DELA Assessment Module (ADAM)

Ensuring that both the new Student System (SS) and the sub-system ADAM could manage the higher stakes demands of a University-wide DELA policy was critical. Regular meetings with the Student System Project managers identified the limitations of the new SS to interface with

the sub-system ADAM. The new SS will have some capacity to identify students and record DELA results and recommendations. Using the new SS, Admissions will enter a 'comment type DELA' which faculties can then use to identify students within the defined lower range. The sub-system, ADAM, will continue to record DELA results and recommendations, which will then be manually entered into a student's study plan on the SS. Further discussion about the interface between the sub-system ADAM and the new SS have been postponed until a definite go-live date can be set.

To align the DELA database with the weighted score calculation, new descriptors and tailored recommendations, ADAM was redeveloped in late 2008. In addition to changes to the business rules, ADAM was given functionality to email DELA results and recommendations directly to students, resolving a long standing issue whereby significant numbers of students did not return to collect hard copy results. Included in the email message is the direction for students to seek further advice from their student centres. This was deemed critical in terms of clarifying the recommendations and assisting students in their study plans, in particular enrolment in the relevant language program.

Funding DELA under the new language policy

It has been generally acknowledged that the LTRC, a self-funded unit within the School of Languages and Linguistics (SOLL) cannot sustain a growing demand for DELA under the new language policy without increasing resources. The funding formula for DELA has not been reviewed since 2004 and does not therefore reflect subsequent increases in staffing costs, nor does it take into account the imperative for further test development and validation of parallel test versions of what will effectively become a University required examination. Furthermore, if the LTRC is to meet faculty demand for cohort specific sessions, as proposed for orientation 2009 (see below), then consideration will have to be given to reviewing the current funding model. Further discussion about a new funding model and development of additional tests has been postponed until 2009.

In response to faculties' request for cohort-specific sessions, as mentioned above, the LTRC will offer additional sittings, increasing from 6 in 2008 to 8 in 2009 (not including the session for the VCA).

Conclusion

Participation in DELA dropped for the second consecutive year, with the decrease in undergraduate take up significantly less than in previous years. For the first time, graduate students were in the majority, representing 53% of DELA uptake. Preparation for the implementation of the new language policy in 2009 dominated DELA administration in 2008. In particular, communication strategies, DELA score calculations, and infrastructure support. Issues that continue to affect DELA are:

- Effective and early communication to students and staff regarding the new policy
- Relevant and flexible language support programs that can be accommodated within degree courses without imposing undue burden on students
- Adequate resourcing for DELA, both test administration and further test development

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Appendix A

English Language Thresholds: Guideline for identifying students for DELA (2004-2008)

The following checklist can be used in either the group or individual course advice interview with all international students and will help identify students who may benefit from sitting the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA).

Students who will **not** be required to undertake DELA will meet any one of the following categories:

- Satisfactorily completion of at least 5 years of secondary studies in a country where English is the official language, gaining a satisfactory pass (70% or more) in an approved final year English
- Within the last 2 years satisfactorily completed at least the first year of an approved tertiary program taught and assessed in the English language in an institution where English is the language of instruction and assessment
- VCE ESL score of 35 or more
- Foundation EAP score of 75 or more
- IELTS score of 7.0 or more

Appendix B

DELA Skills Profile (2009)

Score	Reading	Writing: Form	Writing: Fluency	Writing: Content	Listening
1-2	You read very slowly and may have difficulty extracting meaning from academic prose or following a line of argument because of your inadequate knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar.	You use mainly simple sentences and make some basic grammatical errors. Your vocabulary is restricted and spelling errors and poor word formation cause strain for the reader.	Your writing is hard to understand because your ideas are not organized or because you wrote very little.	You provide very few ideas and most of these are directly copied from the question or irrelevant or you wrote very little.	You may have difficulty extracting key information contained in an academic lecture or interpreting its meaning.
3	You may have difficulty reading academic texts. You may be able to get the gist, but may find that you misunderstand or overlook important concepts or information.	You use a limited range of sentence structures. Grammatical errors and limited vocabulary cause problems in your expression of ideas.	Your writing causes problems for the reader because linking devices are inadequate or absent and the organization is not clear.	You provide few ideas and some may be irrelevant OR you your whole essay missed the point of the question.	You may have considerable difficulty following an academic lecture delivered at native-speaker speed and may find that you misinterpret or draw wrong conclusions from what is said.
4	You may generally understand academic texts but may take some time to draw out the necessary information or to interpret parts of the text, particularly those that are complex or deal with abstract ideas.	You use a satisfactory range of sentence structures but are not always accurate in complex sentences. The errors that you make may hinder the expression of ideas.	Your writing is mainly satisfactory. Inappropriate use of linking devices causes some strain for the reader.	Your argument does not always progress logically and some points may be irrelevant or lack support.	You should be able to understand most of the content of an academic lecture delivered at native-speaker speed, but you could find that you are a little slow processing meaning, and you may sometimes have difficulty distinguishing main points from supporting detail.
5	You should be able to read and interpret most important information in academic texts.	You use a wide variety of vocabulary and sentence structures appropriately, with no significant errors in word formation or spelling.	You have shown that you are generally a competent writer. The essay generally reads fluently and the organization was generally good as you made adequate use of cohesive devices. The tone and style of the essay might have been at times inappropriate.	You provide sufficient ideas and they are arranged logically. Some ideas might lack supporting evidence or the overall point of view is not always clear.	You will be able to extract nearly all the relevant information from an academic lecture, but you may find that you experience difficulty when required to synthesize a number of pieces of information delivered at native-speaker speed.
6	You read efficiently and with ease, extracting and synthesizing both abstract and factual information from linguistically complex texts, even when these are not on familiar topics.	You use a wide variety of sentence structures; your vocabulary is extensive and always used appropriately.	You have shown that you are a competent writer. Your writing is fluent and well organized. The message can be followed effortlessly, the tone and style are appropriate to the task.	Your essay shows a clear and logical progression of ideas. You provide sufficient ideas and evidence, although some examples might lack relevance.	You can understand, recall and synthesize key points and supporting details in an academic lecture delivered at native-speaker speed.

Appendix C

Excerpt from Recommendations of the Steering Committee on integrating language and disciplinary teaching

Options and description	Accessibility	Resourcing
<p>One-on-one consultations, usually for assignments</p> <p><i>Students are required to make an appointment to meet with an advisor.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - These are available on an individual basis - It may be difficult for students to gain access, especially at peak periods of assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Currently considered 'core' service, but an expensive and inefficient use of resources as a large-scale language program - Can be very effective for tailoring intensive support to students deemed at risk - Is also discipline specific; best used in conjunction with other support programs
<p>Generic English language programs</p> <p><i>These are general English language programs, such as writing a literature review. They aim at developing general academic English language skills.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - These programs are available throughout the academic year as part of core business or as required by the faculty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usually resourced centrally (core service) through Academic Skills Unit or within faculty units - These are 'add on' programs: students need to find the time and motivation to attend in their own time, with inconsistent attendance often the result - English language learning is not discipline specific, unless the program is offered under the auspices of the faculty, eg Writing for engineers
<p>Credit-bearing EAP subjects</p> <p><i>These are accredited university subjects.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to this subject would be increased if provision were made in the course structure for all undergraduate degrees (eg VCA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does not require extra faculty resourcing, as they are part of students' workload (as a breadth subject) – as opposed to being 'add on'
<p>Disciplinary adjunct programs</p> <p><i>Tutorials are designed to support students within a core subject, and focus on using disciplinary content to develop English language skills within the context of that course. Tutorials are timetabled in and students attend these as they would their other tutorials.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - These programs would be available to students who require English language support, as identified by DELA, within core or large first year undergraduate classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Funded through service agreements between faculties and the Academic Skills Unit or as part of faculty units, this approach requires adequate resourcing and faculty engagement for success
<p>Embedded English language programs</p> <p><i>Academic English language skills are taught within the curriculum.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Available to all students within the subject 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This program is resource intensive to begin with, as curricula are redesigned materials are developed, but can become less resource intensive over time - Funded through service agreements between faculties and Academic Skills Unit - Requires close collaboration between academic and English language staff