



DELA Faculty Usage Report 2006

Overview of DELA 2006

The Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) was offered to all newly entering international students to the University of Melbourne during orientation 2006. In addition, provision was made for a limited number of local ESL students¹ to sit the assessment, based on their VCE ESL English score. Faculties refer students to take DELA based on their English language proficiency at the time of entry, using guidelines developed by the Language and Learning Skills Unit (LLSU) to identify students most likely to benefit from sitting DELA (see Appendix A).

Two significant changes to the DELA were implemented in 2006:

- The reduction of test time from three hours to two, an improvement directly addressing faculty concerns about testing during the busy orientation and enrolment period
- The change from a 9-point diagnostic scale to a 6-point scale, based on recommendations from the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC)

DELA uptake 2006

In 2006, students undertaking the DELA increased from 654 in 2005 to 786. This is a 20% increase in usage over 2005 statistics, but is similar with the uptake in 2004.

A breakdown of the total number of students sitting DELA in the past 5 years can be seen in the table below:

Year:	2006	2005	2004	2003²	2002	2001
Semester 1:	593	486	581	346	384	432
Semester 2:	193	168	178	208	199	83
Total:	786	654	768	554	583	515

A breakdown by faculty can be seen below:

Faculty	Semester 1	Semester 2	Total
ABP	38	9	47
Arts	63	41	104
Eco/Com	103	54	157
Education	6	3	9

¹ In response to faculty concern about the level of English language proficiency amongst local ESL students, the Vice-Principal and Academic Registrar agreed to open the assessment to this cohort, upon faculty referral and on condition that the current funding would not be affected.

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

Engineering	106	27	133
FLFR	20	3	23
Law	80	27	107
MDHS	97	7	104
Music	5	0	5
Science	70	20	90
SGS	4	1	5
Vet Science	1	1	2
Total	593	193	786

Student results 2006

Of the 786 students who sat DELA, 526 scored 4 or less on Writing (Form), which is used as the default indicator of a student's overall academic language proficiency for success at the tertiary level. On the new 6-point scale, a 4 indicates "Academic English needs improvement. Additional language support is probably necessary." This statistic represents 67% of the cohort and demonstrates that the majority of students identified to sit DELA are indeed being appropriately targeted for language assessment and follow-up support.

Monitoring, reporting and support

Automated DELA Assessment Module (ADAM)

In 2004, a web-based database (Automated DELA Assessment Module or *ADAM*) was developed to provide a more efficient and timely delivery of results as well as a record-keeping facility accessible to all faculties. All faculties have access to the online DELA database, ADAM, and can retrieve DELA scores for their students as well as download statistics for monitoring and reporting processes. Students at risk because of a 4 or less on Writing (Form) can be easily identified through ADAM, and appropriately referred for language support.

In semester 1 2006, the Language and Learning Skills Unit, which manages ADAM, surveyed the faculties, asking for feedback about DELA administration. Three significant changes were made to ADAM, in response to faculty requests:

- Faculties were given access to view all students in the database; previously only the primary faculty had privileges to view a student's DELA results. This implementation was particularly useful to faculties whose students were enrolled in double degrees.
- Faculties were given privileges to print the formal student DELA report directly from the database. This allowed faculties to print results as soon as they were calculated in the database, significantly reducing access time (faculties did not have to wait for the results to be delivered in a hard copy format).
- ADAM was updated to allow for tailored recommendations, based on faculty requirements. Faculties wishing to opt out of ESL credit subject recommendations could now access a generic recommendation referring students to their faculty for advice on language support options. This was particularly relevant to faculties that did not provide for electives in their courses; previously, all students were referred to take up ESL credit subjects despite their course structure not allowing for this (eg MDHS, Education, Law etc).

Language support options

As the central provider of academic and language skills to the University, the Language and Learning Skills Unit offers short courses in pronunciation, academic writing, academic oral communication, reading and critical thinking and conversation. The majority of language support is faculty-based, focussing on the language skills needed in specific disciplines and at the subject level (eg ABP, Education, Law). The LLSU also provides individual tutorials and

online courses and resources for students in need of language support. The LLSU is able to report to faculties on student participation in short courses and at individual tutorials, which may assist with monitoring and reporting of students at risk

In addition, the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU) in Economics and Commerce, and the International Student Support Program (ISSP) in Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, provide a comprehensive suite of programs to support the language development for students in those faculties. In the case of ISSP, services are targeted to international students only.

The Department of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics also offers a range of ESL credit subjects that students may select as electives, at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Many of these subjects are discipline-specific (Engineering, Economics and Commerce, Information Technology). In 2006, Science Communication was introduced to provide a language-based credit subject to the Faculty.

Future issues

English proficiency and academic success

It is important to stress that DELA was not designed as a predictor of academic performance, which may be influenced by a variety of non-linguistic factors, including motivation, subject interest and knowledge, personal issues and cultural competencies, amongst others.

Nevertheless, language proficiency clearly plays an important role in academic success, and unlike many of the non-linguistic factors, is amenable to improvement through appropriate and sustained intervention. Further, consistent feedback from faculties indicate strongly that the ability to determine which students are likely to experience difficulty with language - and therefore difficulty with their course - is considered important, and rightly or wrongly, DELA has been *de facto* serving this purpose for some years.

Additional information about DELA's diagnostic value as a means of guiding faculties and students to appropriate language support, may need to be available to faculties, and advice regarding this matter should be sought from the Language Testing Research Centre, which is responsible for test development and validation. Enhanced descriptors, which offer more detail about the qualities of language performance at each band level, coupled with tailored advice about suitable strategies for improving language proficiency, as opposed to blanket referral to ESL credit subjects, would both add value to the current reports and also provide greater direction to both faculties and support services as to the best approach to develop students' language skills post-DELA. (See Appendix B for current band descriptors.)

Language support in the New Generation degrees

With the proposed introduction of compulsory language testing and follow up support (Selection Procedures Committee Taskforce on English Language Bridging and Support Programs recommendations) there is likely to be an increased demand for language support in 2008. It is important that support is available following testing, and language support will be important both in the new generation undergraduate degrees and also in graduate programs. Reflecting on the findings of the International Student Experience Survey 2005, ensuring local and international students receive adequate language support will need to be a key feature in meeting students' expectations of the new Melbourne Model. International students have high expectations of language support and are high users of support services³.

Potential issues for consideration by the Standing Committees in relation to language support for the new generation undergraduate degrees and by graduate schools in relation to supporting graduate students are:

³ International students represented 51% of the LLSU's individual tutorial service in 2005, and 54% as of 1 September 2006.

- Program structure and location: ensuring language programs are optimally organised to support the academic aims of the Melbourne Model as well the varied and individual language needs of students
- Equitable access to support: managing student and faculty expectations for support
- Delivery mode and measures for monitoring program effectiveness
- Current limitations of DELA: expectations are beyond its original design

Funding implications

In recognition of the priority and demand for English language support services to international students,⁴ funding for DELA was increased from \$40,000 to \$70,000 in 2004. The current agreed funding formula provides for 1,200 students – approximately one-third of international student enrolment – to sit DELA per year⁵. However, increased funding may be required should DELA become compulsory for certain categories of students as a condition of enrolment (as proposed by the Selection Procedures Committee) if this cohort exceeds the current testing allocation.

In addition, the funding formula will need to cover the development of new parallel test versions (necessary to ensure test security over time) and development of expanded band descriptors should the faculties request them.

Finally, provision may need to be made to fund future developments of the DELA database so that it remains up to date and reflects faculty needs in terms of reporting, eg changes to band descriptors.

DELA administration

The LLSU and the LTRC continue to collaborate regarding the administration of DELA.

Issues identified during the implementation of DELA in 2006 include:

- allocating additional sittings of DELA to accommodate late arriving students, and
- delayed dissemination of results due to student enrolment status (eg enrolment not confirmed at the time of sitting the diagnostic assessment).

These have been addressed by regular liaison with faculties about their needs for language testing and other issues affecting timely dissemination of results.

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⁴ As per the *Recommendations from the Diagnostic Testing and English Language Support Programs Report* (2003).

⁵ \$67 per student for the first 600 candidates in a calendar year, and \$45 per student thereafter.

Appendix A

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

The new 6 point scale for explaining DELA results is as follows:

- 6** Good command of academic English.
- 5** Generally good command of academic English. Would benefit from additional language support.
- 4** Academic English needs improvement. Additional language support is probably necessary.
- 3** Academic English needs considerable improvement. Additional language support is essential.
- 1-2** Academic English is weak. Substantial English language support is required. Student at risk.