

PELA

The role of Post-Entry Language Assessment in an institutional language support strategy

Susy Macqueen

UQ Academic Language Forum 26 Sept 2025



Australian
National
University

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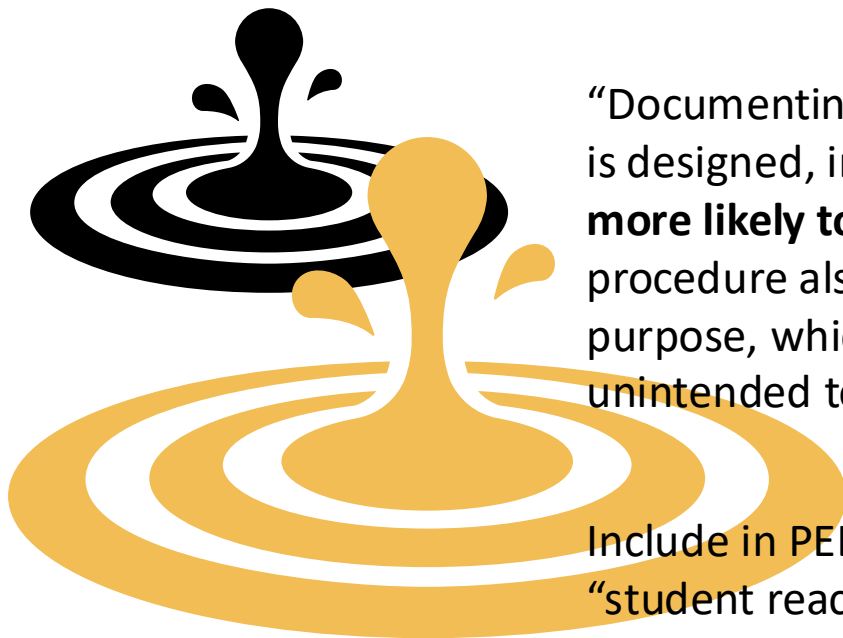
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The point of PELAs

1. An Australian university qualification means that the knowledge and skills outcomes of the degree have been achieved **in English**
2. **Post-Entry Language Assessments (PELAs)** are tests of English that occur in the first few months of a program to determine whether students are likely to need English language support to engage successfully in their studies.
3. PELAs are used **in conjunction with** academic language learning support services to enable **equitable participation** in English-medium studies for students who are studying through the medium of English as an Additional Language (EAL)
4. The most important aspect of a PELA is **how it connects to students' English language development opportunities**, both within and separate to their disciplinary studies.
5. PELAs are used by many universities but their implementation varies widely.

Effect-driven assessment



“Documenting the **intended effect** of the test before it is designed, in order to make design **decisions that are more likely to produce the intended effect**. The procedure also requires a precise statement of test purpose, which acts as a limitation on future unintended test use” (Fulcher, 2010, p. 321).

Include in PELA design: language support types and “student reaching mechanisms” that will flow from the test scores in the implementation design:

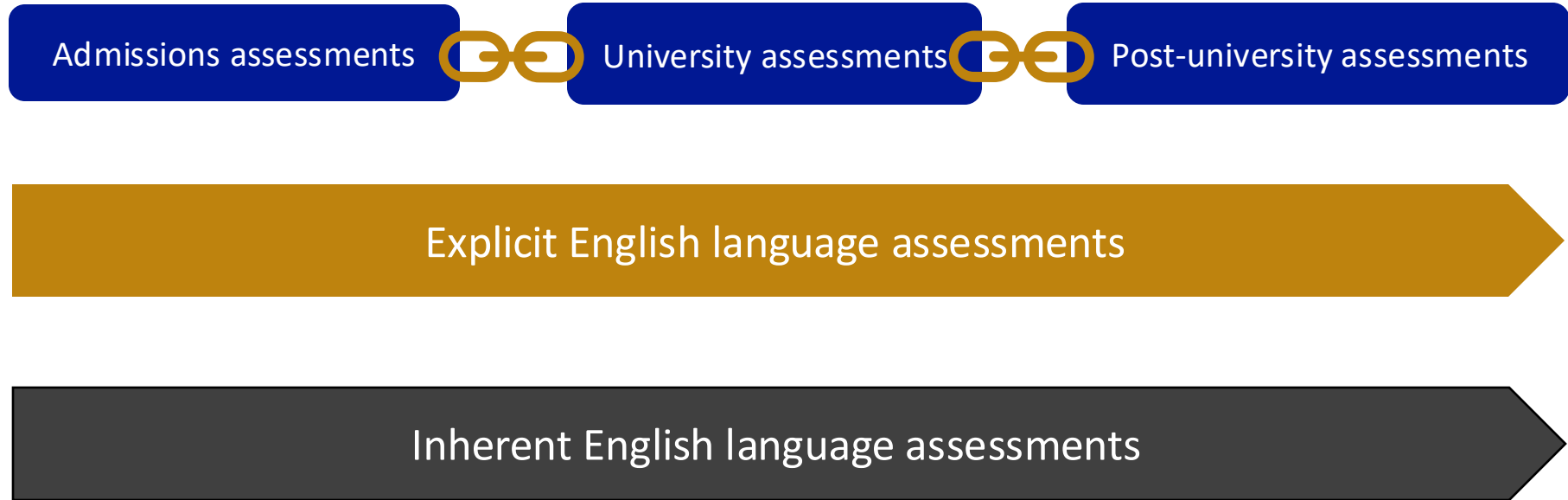
How do PELA scores meaningfully lead to well-suited language support reaching those who need it?



English language development before, during and beyond university

Language assessment chain

English language assessment chain



English language assessment chain

Admissions assessments

University assessments

Post-university assessments

English language proficiency tests
(e.g., IELTS, PTE, TOEFL)

English language pathway
institution final assessments

English programs in Australian
school qualifications

Post entry tests, e.g., PELA,
language placement tests
Language explicit assessments,
e.g., “expression”,
“communication”, “clarity”
criteria

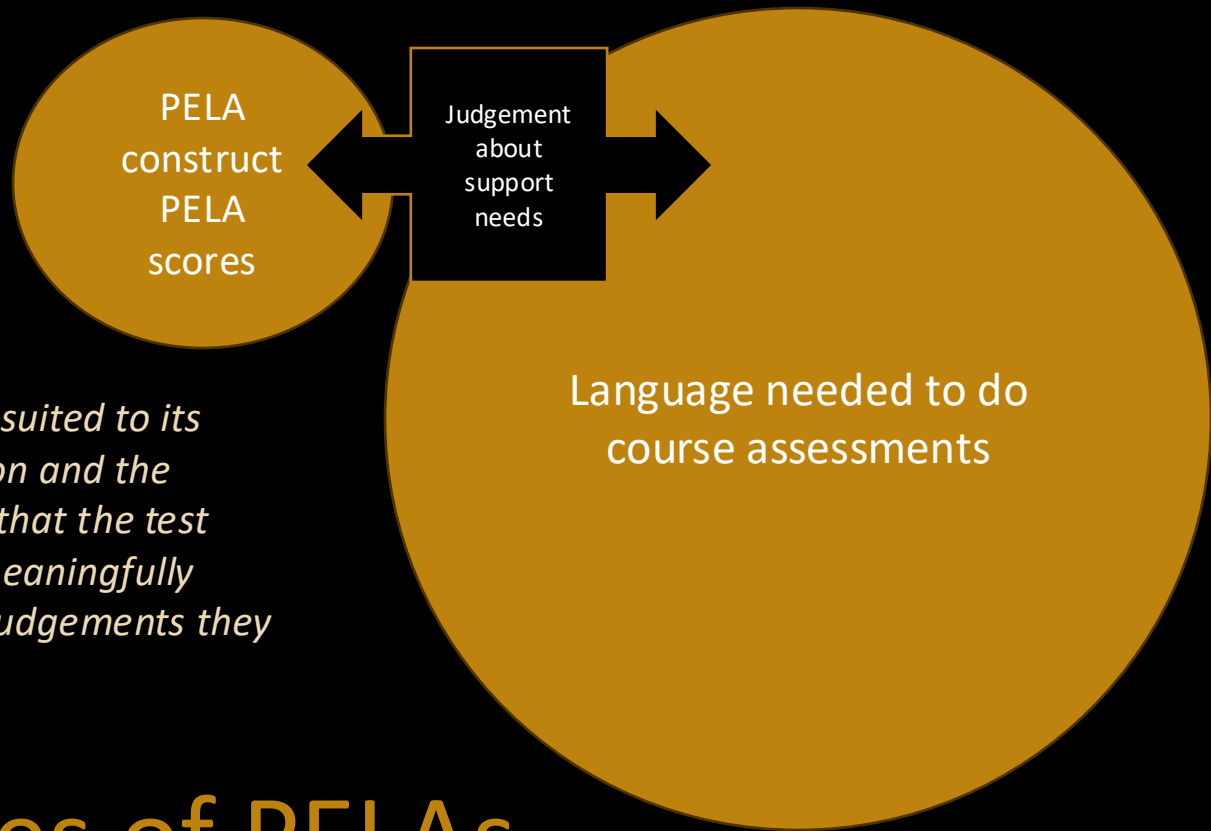
Exit testing using English
language proficiency tests,
e.g., IELTS
Professional registration
language tests, e.g., IELTS, OET

Inherent language requirements in
assessments for Australian & other
school qualifications (e.g., IB,
designated country scores)

Other entry assessments with
inherent language requirements,
e.g., UCAT “verbal reasoning”

Disciplinary assessments with
inherent language
requirements, e.g., task done in
English, assessed on discipline
content

Recruitment testing
Professional registration
content tests, e.g., accounting
CPA
Job interviews (selection
criteria)



A test must be demonstrably suited to its stated purpose, the population and the context in which it is used so that the test scores are trustworthy and meaningfully related to the decisions and judgements they inform.

(ILTA Guidelines, 2024)

Uses & types of PELAs

Uses of PELAs

- **Identify** students who may not cope with English language demands for targeted language support early in degree
- **Provide information about specific aspects/skills** that might be supported, e.g., focus on writing skills
- **Provide cross-sectional, consistent evidence** about English language proficiency for incoming cohorts via different admissions pathways (different English language tests, with different test scores, via different countries, agents, via pathway language programs, etc.)
- **Monitor** student performance (TEQSA) (e.g., monitoring GPAs, uptake of support services, student feedback on support, etc.)

****Uses of test scores depend on the robustness of the PELA****



Types of PELAs

1. Screening PELA

Short tests, limited in scope and intended to determine which students *may* be at risk and should undergo more comprehensive assessment, either through another test or more formative procedures, e.g., with a language support specialist.

Typically capture a very small sample of language use/knowledge; usually focused on vocabulary/grammar, e.g., in a cloze-style paragraph

A new law that came into force last Monday bans the feeding of pigeons in London's Trafalgar Square. Anyone cau [] giving fo [] to th [] will fa [] a fine o [] up t [] £500. Si [] 2002, diff [] ways o [] frightening t [] pigeons aw [] have be [] tried b [] none ha [] worked. T [] London Ci [] Council h [] spent £25m do [] the squ [] up. O [] Councillor sa [] "the improv [] wouldn't wo [] if t [] square w [] still infested with pigeons". However, pigeon supporters plan to ignore the new law and will continue to feed the birds.

Types of PELAs

2. Diagnostic PELA

Longer tests, intended to determine what kinds of support an individual student might need most

Captures a larger sample and more comprehensive and representative of the academic domain, e.g., includes an academic writing task

Recent technological developments have made human translation redundant.

Write an argumentative essay on the statement above. Use evidence and experience to support your main points. Write 200-300 words.

Criteria:

Lexical range

Grammatical accuracy

Audience awareness

Use of argumentation and evidence



Types of PELAs

3. Disciplinary PELA

A disciplinary PELA is based in a particular field or combination of fields that allows **more specific assessment** of disciplinary vocabulary and genres (among other things); it may be screening or diagnostic.

Read the following passage and answer the questions.

Until recently, economists studied economic history in much the same way historians study social and political history. They tried to uncover reasons why events in a particular place unfolded in the way they did, by identifying what they believed to be the key drivers there. The stress was on the uniqueness of the events being studied. A classic research topic in that mould involved asking why the first industrial revolution occurred in the 18th century and why it took place in England. As you can see, the question was based on three presumptions: there *was* a first industrial revolution; it occurred in the 18th century; and it was based in England. All three premises have been questioned, of course, but there was an enormous amount of work to be done even among those who had arrived at those premises from historical study. In the event, the literature built round those questions is one of the great achievements of economic history.

Excerpt from: Dasgupta, P. (2007) *Economics: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Answer questions 1-10 by choosing the best option.



PELA Implementation



Key PELA policy decisions for an institutional strategy

What aspects of language ability are measured in the PELA?

To what extent are they measured? (Time? Length of responses? Breadth of texts, topics and genres?)

Is it “general” academic language or discipline-specific language?

Who does the PELA? Everyone? Particular entry pathways?

When and how should it be delivered? Supervised? Online?

What do the scores *mean*? What is the score threshold for direction to support services? On what basis is this threshold decided?

Is the PELA optional or mandatory? If mandatory, what happens if students don't do it?

What happens on the basis of the scores? Is language support optional or mandatory?



Who does the PELA?

Comprehensive administration: all in-coming students to do the PELA

Positives: Equitable, ensures no one who needs support is missed (Murray, 2013); avoids native speaker/non-native speaker and citizen/non-citizen distinctions

Pitfalls: Requires careful communication & rationale; time & cost

Selective administration: administered only to certain groups, for example:

- students who enter on the basis of a language test or a language pathway college assessment
- students with English language test scores below a certain threshold (e.g., scores below IELTS 7)
- students entering degrees considered 'language heavy' such as Law

Positives: Less time is spent administering and doing the PELA; PELA may be designed more specifically, e.g., for a particular discipline

Pitfalls: Requires careful communication; risks missing students who would benefit from language support



Optional or
mandatory
PELA?

Optional or
mandatory
language
support?

Considerations:

The length and nature of the PELA instrument. Longer assessment; more imposition.

The nature of the language support.

Compulsory support that is not credit bearing might be seen as a further burden on an already-heavy workload.

A credit-bearing course may be seen as an unwanted expense displacing a disciplinary course in their program.

Disciplinary-oriented support that is relevant to students' subjects/assessments is generally valued.

Ethical considerations. Students may be given the autonomy and responsibility to decide whether or not to access language support services in light of feedback from the PELA.



Stakes

The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor (Campbell, 1979, p. 85).

The 'stakes' of a PELA need to be carefully managed. If students have to be considered 'at risk' to access support, they may perform poorly to access support.

If students feel penalised by support (e.g., mandatory courses or extra workload), there will be pressures to do well dishonestly or resist the support in some way.



Communications & considerations

Institutional experiences show that a PELA should sit within a clearly articulated English language and academic literacy development strategy and be framed *inclusively and developmentally* without deficit notions.

Clear and empathetic communications to staff and students regarding PELA rationale and implementation are critical (Edwards et al., 2021; Elder & Read, 2015; Knoch & Elder, 2013; Ransom, 2009)

- Facing (another) English test can cause anxiety (even if it is not called a 'test')
- Some students have also been reluctant to take English language development courses, even if they are needed (Andrade, 2009; Kim, 2021)
- Staff have questioned the value of imposing English language development on students (Elder & Read, 2015)
- Discipline staff may not think academic language development is part of their pedagogical scope or ability (Edwards et al., 2021)
- Staff may disagree with the mechanisms of implementation (Harper, 2013).



Diverse roles, constructs, purposes
Common responsibilities



Diverse roles, constructs & purposes

There tends to be different “constructs” (focus of purpose, work and assessment) across the assessment chain

Admissions – *Academic English language proficiency*
point-in-time for future prediction

Academic language pathway colleges & academic support services – development of *academic literacies* over time

Disciplinary educators – Development of *disciplinary registers* over time towards future *professional communication skills*



Diverse roles, constructs purposes

Admissions assessments

University assessments

Post-university assessments

Explicit English language assessments

Inherent English language assessments

English language
proficiency

Language is multiple resource systems (phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic, discourse, pragmatic, etc.) that are mobilised in different ways across topics and contexts.

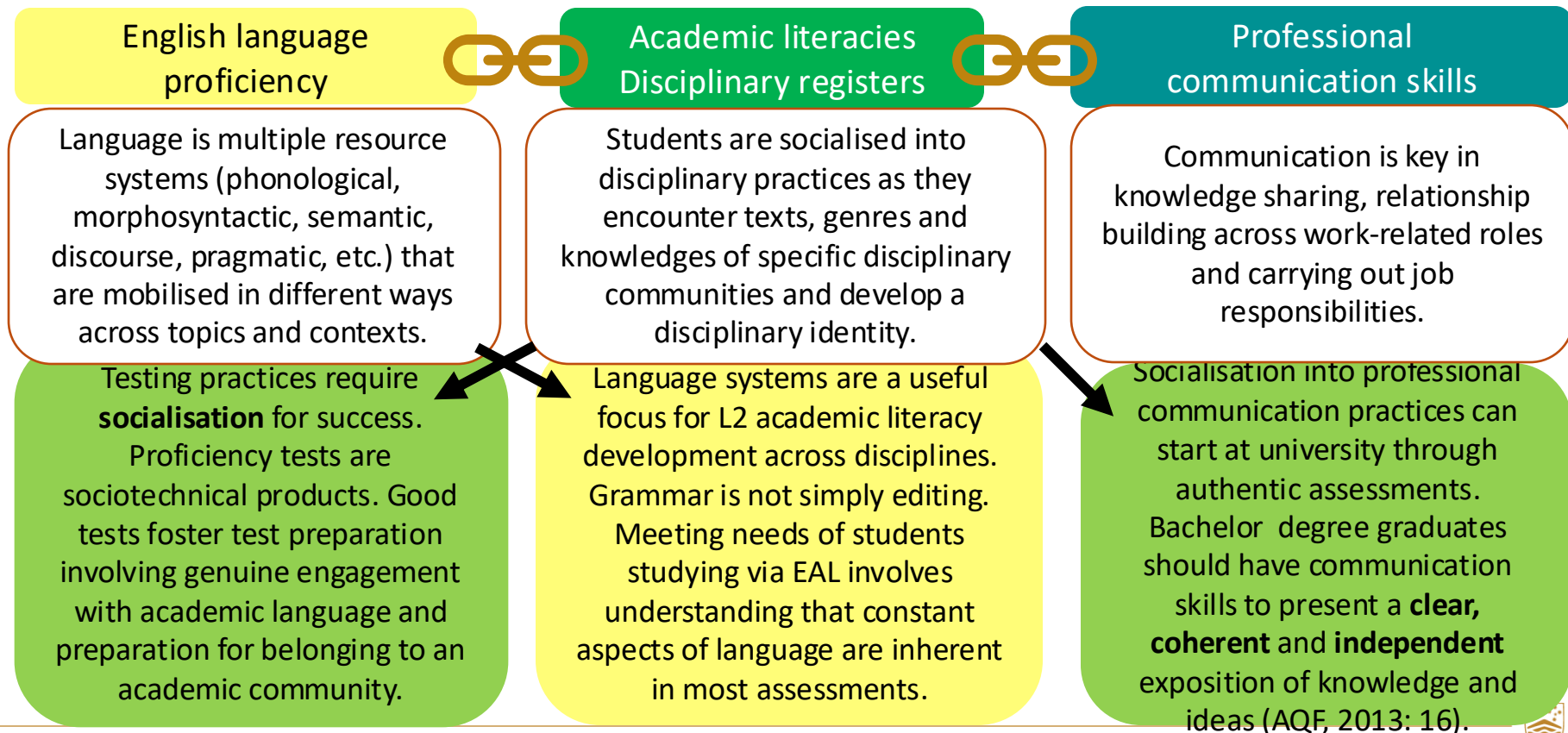
Academic literacies
Disciplinary registers

Students are socialised into disciplinary practices as they encounter texts, genres and knowledges of specific disciplinary communities and develop a disciplinary identity.

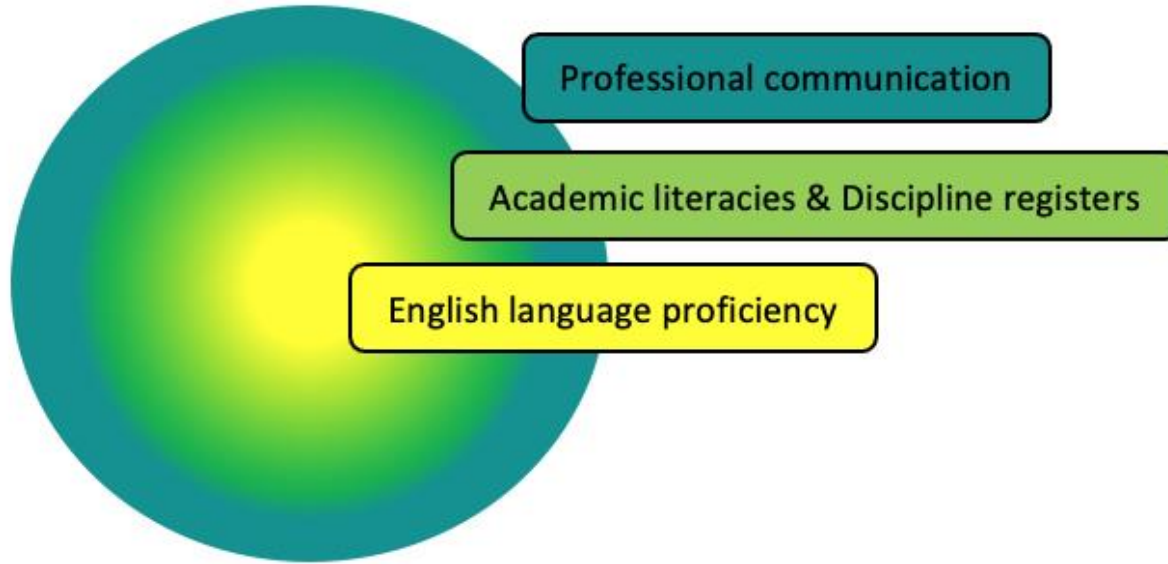
Professional
communication skills

Communication is key in knowledge sharing, relationship building across work-related roles and carrying out job responsibilities.

Affordances of diverse constructs



Holistic, developmental view of language development across institutional and educational transitions



After Murray and Hicks (2016)

All roles (policy administrators and educators) share responsibility in developing the language and communication abilities of students from all backgrounds across assessment chain (Edwards et al., 2021).

Principles (from UTS experience):

- *Build on what is already in place to ensure the framework is sustainable and scalable.*
- *Partner with faculty and, where possible, students to build capacity and achieve outcomes.*

(Edwards et al., 2021, pp. 53, 58)

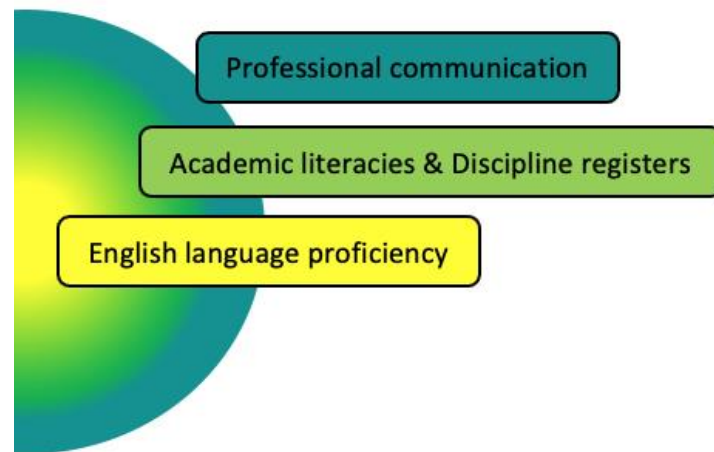
Take aways and what now?

- The most important aspect of a PELA is the **extent to which it connects actual student needs to well-targeted academic language support services**, alongside or embedded in the discipline.
- Different **academic language constructs** may be salient at different points in the assessment chain before, during and after study. Staff awareness of the **affordances** of different views can enrichen assessment practice and the student experience.
- Educators should be aware that language/literacy/communication is part of most assessment; they may choose to **treat language explicitly or inherently** in assessments. **Careful communication** around PELA implementation may raise awareness.
- Assessment practice is only as useful as the **type and extent of engagement** it generates.



Challenges & Changes

- **Supervised** assessments and/or assessments that **promote student accountability and engagement**
- **Loss of trust** in student authorial voice
- Rise of **AI-integrated into assessment designs**, e.g., in a **flipped assessment design** where AI produces and human responds/reviews, **AI tasks** such as prompt writing.
- Increased focus on **stages or by-products** of a task, e.g., reflecting, describing process, demonstrating stages.
- The **mediating** role of language in learning is at risk of being downplayed or ignored in both inherent and explicit assessments of language.
- “Literacy” has taken on a **moral** dimension (responsibility on students)
- AI may be permitted for **editing**, which may mask language/literacy/disciplinary development or level the playing field for EAL students.



Engaging Assessing

Assessment design and implementation should focus on the **type and extent of student engagement** in completing an assessment, e.g., the depth of knowledge and language/literacy activation, the extent of participation, the productive and receptive use of language to build knowledge.

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Thank you!

susy.macqueen@anu.edu.au