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Widening participation and English language proficiency: A convergence with implications for assessment practices in higher education

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The widening participation agenda has important implications for those in English-medium higher education institutions responsible for the provision of English language support. Importantly, given the diverse nature of the ‘non-traditional’ student cohort that is the focus of this agenda, that section of the student population potentially requiring English language development extends beyond those students of non-English speaking backgrounds – traditionally the focus of such provision – to include native speakers of English whose language exhibits forms – dialectal characteristics – not necessarily in keeping with the expectations of the academy or indeed the workplace, post-graduation. In order to ensure that these students have access to language support resources that are squeezed by ever-present funding pressures, there needs to be a mechanism for identifying those most at risk due to weak language. This article considers some of the issues around the implementation of a post-enrolment English language assessment regime.

Keywords: Widening participation, English language proficiency, post-enrolment language assessment, language competence of non-traditional students

Introduction

In common with other countries where English-medium universities are the norm, Australia has, in recent years, witnessed an interesting and important convergence of two facets of higher education, each of which has assumed a place of some prominence on political and education agendas. The first concerns widening participation and associated policies and strategies designed to raise the aspirations and opportunities of individuals from socio-economic, educational and cultural milieu traditionally under-represented in higher education (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1998; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009) with a view to promoting greater equity through a more diverse student population defined on the basis of academic potential rather than personal situational circumstance. In large part, such initiatives reflect not only ethical concerns around equal opportunity but also what Osborne describes as ‘worldwide concerns expressed by both international bodies and national governments that there are strong economic reasons for *increasing* access and for *widening* the constituency that higher education serves by including those groups who have traditionally been excluded’ (2003:6). In Australia, these ‘concerns’ have most recently found voice in the Bradley Review of Higher Education (Bradley 2008: xi), the Executive Summary of which states:

To increase the numbers participating [in university degree programs] we must also look to members of groups currently under-represented within the system, that is, those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas.

The report goes on to say that, by 2020, students from low socio-economic backgrounds should account for twenty per cent of undergraduate enrolments in Australian higher education.

The second facet that has featured prominently in government and educational discourse relates to the English language competence of students enrolling in university degree programmes. The much spoken about globalisation of education has resulted in English-medium universities enrolling growing numbers of students for whom English is not a first language (Baik & Greig, 2009; Banks and Olsen, 2008; Dunworth, 2009; Murray 2010a, 2010b; Ransom, 2009). Despite institutions setting English language entry conditions designed to ensure that students have the linguistic capacity to negotiate their academic studies, many still struggle nonetheless, presenting academic staff and student services units with significant challenges. In some cases, lecturers are forced to ‘tone down’ their course materials (Benzie, 2010; Bretag, 2007; Jamieson *et al.*, 2000; Pantelides, 1999; Sawir, 2005; Watty, 2007) and spend time addressing English language problems many regard as outside the scope of their expertise and locus of responsibility (Ferguson 1996). This situation calls into question the quality and depth of both the knowledge base and the English language competency with which these students exit their programmes of study, and by extension, their future prospects. For the students themselves, weak language skills can lead to feelings of anxiety, frustration, de-motivation and an inability to engage with the learning process. Often, these individuals perform adequately according to assessment methods that are multiple choice or short answer but exhibit weak language skills upon commencing language-rich courses. Some may ultimately opt to withdraw from their studies altogether, a decision which can carry with it the stigma of ‘failure’ within their families and/or cultures, and as such represents a potential source of real trauma. It can also reinforce latent feelings of a lack of self-efficacy. Those in health sciences and education programmes, in particular, can struggle with professional courses and work placements and, upon graduation, may be unable either to convince future employers of their ability to do the job due to weak language skills, or to meet

professional registration boards' competency assessment criteria (Birrell and Hawthorne, 1996).

Early in 2009, a document was circulated to Australian universities entitled *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities*. This document was the outcome of a project funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and undertaken by a Steering Committee convened by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). It acknowledges the challenges presented by the ever-swelling number of students entering higher education for many of whom English is not a first language, and its purpose is to enhance the quality of English language provision at universities by having a sector-wide mechanism for its monitoring and evaluation. The document reads:

The expectation of the project Steering Committee is that universities will consider the Principles as they would consider other guidelines on good practice. As part of AUQA quality audits universities can expect to be asked about the way they have addressed the Principles, just as they are likely to be asked by AUQA auditors about their application of a range of other external reference documents for the university sector (DEEWR 2009, p. 2).

The Good Practice Principles document contextualises and articulates ten principles which it describes as 'general statements for individual universities to address in the context of their own operations and environment' (2009, p. 2). These 'statements' cover issues including: resourcing; institutional obligations in respect of English; students' responsibility for improving their English competence; the need to monitor university entry pathways in terms of how effectively they prepare students linguistically for their studies; early diagnosis of language needs and opportunities for student self-assessment; evidence-based evaluation of language development activities; the enhancement of language through opportunities for

social interaction; the integration of language proficiency with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery; and language and communication skills as important graduate attributes.

Although much of the discussion around English language proficiency focuses on students of non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), there is certainly some acknowledgement at least of the relevance of the issue to native speakers of English (ESB) and, more specifically, to that subset of this cohort who come from non-traditional backgrounds and who have experienced disadvantage that has impacted on their education. Early on in its Good Practice Principles document, DEEWR states:

With widening participation across tertiary education and the increasing numbers of international students, it can no longer be assumed that students enter their university study with the level of academic language proficiency required to participate effectively in their studies (DEEWR 2009, p. 2).

In similar vein, Dunworth argues that:

Widening participation policies, internationalisation, technological developments, a broadening of academic entry requirements, a rise in occupations requiring tertiary qualifications and changes in the demographics of Australia's population (see, for example, Australian Education International [AEI] 2009; Access Economics 2008; Birrell *et al.* 2008; Scott 2008) have resulted in enrolments of students with diverse educational, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. We can no longer expect any student, regardless of background, to arrive at university replete with the requisite 'graduate' level of English language proficiency (Dunworth 2010, p. 7).

The intersection of the widening participation and English language proficiency agendas can also be seen in the discourse around the now global competitive market economy and the increased onus this has placed on higher education institutions to produce work-ready graduates. DEEWR, for example, reports that ‘English language proficiency has become an important issue in Australian higher education, due in part to a heightened awareness of the role of English language ability in employment outcomes and the role of international graduates in meeting skill shortages in the Australian workforce’ (2009, p. 1). This statement is mirrored in the Bradley Review, which observes:

‘Developed and developing countries alike accept there are strong links between their productivity and the proportion of the population with high-level skills. These countries have concluded that they must invest not only to encourage a major increase in the numbers of the population with degree-level qualifications but also to improve the quality of graduates ... The nation will need more well-qualified people if it is to anticipate and meet the demands of a rapidly moving global economy (2008, p. xi).

This emphasis on social capital as a driver of the market economy, and thus nations’ fortunes, is reflected in such higher education initiatives as graduate qualities frameworks, and experiential learning schemes. In Australia, it can also be seen in the dependency on increased numbers of skilled migrant workers in response to which there is a growing trend for professional accreditation bodies to establish or increase existing English language criteria for NESB students as a condition of professional registration, with a view to ensuring that practising professionals have the communicative competence necessary to carry out their roles effectively and, in certain contexts such as the health professions, safely. In 2009, for example, the Australian Nursing & Midwifery accreditation body (the Nursing & Midwifery Board of Australia) increased its International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

requirement from 6.5 to 7.0, including a minimum of 7.0 in each of the 4 sub-skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. This means that, regardless of whether or not students have met their degree programme requirements, they will be unable to become registered or enrolled nurses if they have not also met these recalibrated professional English language standards. Likewise, indications are that those equivalent professional bodies responsible for accrediting teachers and accountants in Australia are likely to follow suit in the near future.

What is interesting in all these initiatives is that, despite there being some acknowledgement in the surrounding discourse of the requirement to address the language proficiency needs of ESB as well as NESB students, the former cohort is not typically required, explicitly at least, to demonstrate evidence of ‘adequate’ language proficiency (usually defined in terms of an IELTS score or equivalent), either for the purpose of entry to university undergraduate courses, entry to English language improvement schemes post-entry where these exist, or, ultimately, entry to the professions. There is an assumption, it seems, that native speakers come equipped with the requisite language skills by virtue of having grown up in an English speaking environment. This assumption warrants close scrutiny given that it has the potential to impact on how institutions respond, if at all, to the language development needs of this particular cohort – a cohort of whom non-traditional students will form an increasingly significant proportion if government policy is implemented as intended. Fundamental to any such scrutiny is a consideration of the construct of language proficiency.

What is language proficiency?

‘Language proficiency’, whether as discussed in language-related documents such as the Good Practice Principles or in reference to English language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL

(Test of English as a Foreign Language), is something of a catchall term and as such does not serve particularly well the academic community, who need to make decisions about English language assessment and provision. I have, elsewhere (Murray, 2010a), argued the benefit of deconstructing the term, and proposed a conceptualisation comprising three interactive but conceptually distinct competencies: proficiency, academic literacy and professional communication skills. ‘Proficiency’ is a general communicative competence in language that enables its users to express and understand meaning accurately, fluently and appropriately according to context, and which comprises a set of generic skills and abilities (see, for example, Bachman, 1990; Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Hymes, 1972). Proficiency is reflected in learning that includes a focus on grammar, phonology, listening skills, vocabulary development, reading and writing skills, communication strategies, fluency, and the pragmatics of communication and associated concerns with politeness, implicature and inference. These represent a generic facility with language and are prerequisites to developing academic literacy and professional communication skills. Their importance to academic success is well documented (Elder, 1993; Johnson, 1988; Tonkin, 1995).

‘Academic literacy’ refers to an individual’s conversancy in the specialised vocabularies, concepts, and knowledges associated with particular disciplines, each of which has its own distinctive patterns of meaning-making activity (genres, rhetorical structures, argument formulations, narrative devices etc) and ways of contesting meaning (Neumann, 2001; Rex & McEachen, 1999). Different disciplines require students to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each, and to handle the social meanings and identities it evokes (Lea & Street, 1998; Lea & Stierer, 2000; North, 2005).

Professional communication skills refers to those skills and strategies students require to communicate in an academic context according to the particular demands of their discipline and those of the profession into which they eventually hope to enter. They include

intercultural competence (Alptekin, 2002; Kramsch, 1993); interpersonal skills, including accommodation, politeness/‘face’, turn-taking, awareness of self and other, listening strategies (Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor, 2001; Goffman, 1967); conversancy in the discourses and behaviours associated with particular domains; leadership skills (Lumsden & Lumsden, 1997); and non-verbal communication skills (Hybels & Weaver, 2001). The case for distinguishing professional communication skills from proficiency and academic literacy becomes evident when one considers that a native speaker of English, fully proficient by definition and perhaps even with advanced academic literacy skills, may not necessarily be a good communicator. Equally, having advanced English language proficiency does not equate to having well developed academic literacy: students may be highly proficient users of English but lack the academic literacies needed to perform well in their studies.

In terms of academic literacy and professional communication skills, there is a good argument for embedding these in the curriculum such that they are taught by academic subject lecturers (as opposed to English language specialists) and so as to ensure that all students, regardless of language background, develop competency in them (see, for example, Wingate, Andon & Cogo, 2011). Although domestic students will come with varying degrees of literacy, and international students with literacy skills they have developed within their own education systems, few if any students, whether ESB or NESB, domestic or international, will come adequately equipped with the specific set of academic literacy practices they require for their particular degree. These practices need to be learned, and learned within the context of their discipline area, embedded within the curriculum and presented as an integral part of their undergraduate studies where they take on immediacy, relevance, and authenticity (Curnow & Liddicoat, 2008; Warren, 2002; Wingate, 2006). Similarly, professional communication skills need to be taught as a regular part of the curriculum and not as a bolt-on supplementary

course, given their often discipline-specific nature and the fact that conversancy in them is fundamental to operating appropriately in both academic and professional contexts.

While subject lecturers can reasonably be expected to have an implicit knowledge of the academic literacies and communication skills they need to impart to their students, many will require professional development by English language and communication specialists to help them articulate and acquire a good understanding of the literacy practices and communication skills they demonstrate unconsciously on a daily basis, along with the associated pedagogies for their delivery. In addition, there would need to be consultation around how best to map these onto the curriculum strategically, in a way that ensures they are taught both in contexts where they naturally arise and in a logical sequence (Bohemia, Farrell, Power & Salter, 2007; Curnow & Liddicoat, 2008).

Embedding academic literacies and communication skills in this way is a challenging process, particularly at a time when curricula seem to be perennially squeezed by efforts to accommodate institutional policy initiatives around such things as widening participation, graduate qualities, and work-based/experiential learning. It involves a culture change among academic faculty, who tend to see literacy as part of language proficiency and thus the responsibility of service units rather than as a fundamental part of the discipline, and who often already feel put upon and frustrated by the fact that curricula appear to be in a constant state of renewal and never given the opportunity to bed in. Furthermore, it is an exercise that is likely to take years rather than months to complete given its institution-wide nature, and this means that it also depends on the continued support of senior officers and bodies within the institution the make-up of which is prone to change, often on a fairly regular basis. While these realities certainly do not constitute sufficient reason for rejecting the notion of embedding academic literacies and communication skills in the curriculum, they do mean that the exercise needs to be approached with tact and sensitivity. Most importantly, it needs to be

presented not as something being imposed from above, but as an initiative that exists to make academics' lives easier in the medium term by addressing a problem that is a proven source of frustration for many of them. In addition, it needs to be framed as a consultative and collaborative process in which academic faculty are seen as having the disciplinary expertise and academic developers/English specialists as having the language expertise. As more universities require newly-appointed academics to undergo higher education teaching courses as part of the probationary process, these would appear to offer a useful initial vehicle via which to raise awareness in new staff of the need to reflect on what academic literacy and communication skills mean for their particular discipline and ways of mapping these onto the curriculum and teaching them in the manner described. Over time, dependency on academic developers and English language specialists will be reduced as departments develop and internalise relevant knowledge and experience in applying these processes and find themselves able to conduct the appropriate professional development themselves. Indeed, in time and as new academic faculty replace old, the need for such professional development will itself decrease.

This leaves proficiency. Proficiency of an acceptable standard for the purpose of tertiary study is something with which university students are expected to come equipped; indeed, as we have seen, gate-keeping tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are designed to ensure that NESB entrants do so. Unfortunately, however, the number of students who meet IELTS/TOEFL entry criteria and still struggle to cope with the language demands of their studies suggests that these tests are coming up short, either due to inherent flaws in the instruments themselves or their misuse by institutions (Murray, 2010a). One thing is certain, the pressure on universities to obtain an ever-larger market share of the student population means that universities, which traditionally benchmark against competitor institutions in respect of English language requirements, are unlikely to unilaterally raise those requirements

if this risks losing a competitive edge. This raises important ethical questions around whether institutions should be knowingly accepting students whose language proficiency is inadequate for their studies. Furthermore, assuming that institutional policies around English language entry criteria are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, it increases the need for universities to ensure that they have in place measures – and associated resources – to help students develop their language proficiency post-enrolment.

The argument for some form of post-enrolment language assessment

Resource limitations, along with scheduling difficulties, mean that higher education institutions need to offer English language provision that is cost-effective but which brings the desired improvement to students' proficiency levels. This is a big ask and one that requires creativity. In particular, universities are looking to bolster their online resources and their use of new technologies which, although often costly to design and purchase, are seen as 'resource-light' once in place. However, despite the unprecedented access staff and students have to such technologies, the forms of English language provision in higher education institutions worldwide suggest that this cannot – and perhaps should not – always be a substitute for face to face tuition, whether on a class or individual basis. As such, English-medium universities typically offer a suite of language development options including online resources, periodic workshops, credit and non-credit bearing proficiency courses, one-to-one consultations, so-called 'buddy' and peer mentoring schemes, and various mechanisms that allow for language feedback on graded coursework. While some of these options are open-access, others are offered on a needs basis with only those at greatest risk having access to all available resources. It is as a means of ascertaining 'need' that the notion of post-enrolment language assessment enters the equation.

Recently, in Australia, there has been a good deal of debate around the idea of assessing the English language skills of new entrants to university (Dunworth, 2009; Harris, 2010; Murray, 2010a), and again, in part this is a reaction to the Good Practice Principles, and in particular Principle 7, ‘English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment’ (DEEWR 2009, p. 8). Although assessment raises a face validity issue – and associated marketing risks – requiring as it does students to undergo a language assessment procedure after having already met their university’s English language entry requirements (see, for example, Ransom 2009), it could equally be seen as a significant marketing asset if presented in terms of added value to the student learning experience and indicative of the institution’s commitment to supporting its students and producing more rounded graduates who are better placed to enter and succeed in their studies and in workplace. Students who feel insecure about their English, whether ESB or NESB, are likely to look favourably on a university able to demonstrate established measures for assessing students’ linguistic preparedness and ensuring follow-up provision where necessary. If, as I propose below, such assessment is made optional but incentivised, this, along with the kind of astute presentation of the exercise I am suggesting, mitigates risk to institutions concerned about the message it may send to students, competitor institutions and educational and government bodies about their position in the market.

For those institutions that see post-enrolment language assessment as a useful exercise, three key questions arise: what should be tested, who should be tested, and how should they be tested. With regard to the first question, there would appear to be little point in testing students’ academic literacy and professional communication skills if, as I have suggested, students should be taught them anyway, as a matter of course and by virtue of the fact of their being embedded in the curriculum. This leaves proficiency as the only sensible focus of post-enrolment language assessment.

Identifying students at risk due to weak English is notoriously difficult mainly because, just as one cannot assume that all international students are NESB and/or at risk, equally, not all domestic students have the English language proficiency they need to pursue their studies and maximise their academic potential. A proportion of domestic students holding permanent residency or citizenship status, for example, despite being NESB, will not be required to provide evidence of their language competence if they have applied to university from local secondary schools, where they may only have spent one or two years studying and not necessarily having acquired a level of proficiency that equates to the IELTS (or equivalent) score stipulated by the receiving university. Nor can it be assumed that all ESB students have the language skills they require. While it is the case that any native speaker of English is, by definition, fully proficient, their language may nonetheless exhibit dialectal and registerial features not in keeping with the expectations of the academy or indeed the workplace and as such may require modification through appropriate pedagogy. In particular, for the purposes of the current article, those groups that constitute the focus of the widening participation agenda will form an important and increasingly prominent part of this cohort, coming as many do from backgrounds of social and educational disadvantage. Any assessment regime needs to be alert to the sensitivities involved in dealing with cohorts such as these. It cannot, for example, simply identify all international students and students with ‘foreign-sounding’ names and subject them to some form of post-enrolment language assessment. Not only would this allow other potentially at-risk groups to slip through the net, as we have seen, it would also render institutions susceptible to accusations of discrimination. Nor can such a regime assume, on the basis of socio-economic area, that students from particular localities will be more at risk linguistically and, therefore, legitimate candidates for assessment. Given that self-nomination is also highly unlikely to capture all potentially at-risk students, the only watertight alternative is to test *all* newly enrolled students. While this option helps circumvent

problems around discrimination and helps ‘defuse’ the issue of assessing students post-enrolment who have already met institutional language entry criteria by presenting it as part of the institution’s normal post-entry apparatus, it does bring with it cost implications and logistical complexities around how it is administered, and universities will individually need to decide whether to make assessment (a) truly universal, or (b) optional but available to all – encouraging uptake by making the more resource-intensive language support options available only to those who have opted to undergo assessment and have been identified as ‘at-risk’. This approach of incentivising participation by students in post-enrolment language assessment has the important added advantage of circumventing the quite thorny question of how institutions who choose to mandate participation ensure compliance (see, for example, Bright and von Randow, 2004) and what, if any, action can be taken against students who opt out of any such assessment and subsequent provision. Ransom (2009) identifies a number of issues around compliance and asks: ‘To what degree should faculties let students reap the benefits or consequences of their decisions? How often should faculties communicate with students before it becomes a case of harassment? Should there be a university-wide response to non-compliance?’ (2009: 22). Efforts by some universities to improve compliance have focused on: demonstrating to students that it is in their own best interests to buy into post-enrolment language assessment; reassuring them that poor performance will not result in expulsion from their programme or the university but, rather, in access to language development opportunities; and instilling in them a sense of responsibility (shared with the university) for their English language development – in some cases by requiring them to sign an affidavit to that effect.

In terms of the ‘how’ of assessment, there are two main options: assessment via some form of test or assessment via an early piece of assessed coursework. In Australia, the balance has been swinging in favour of some form of test and Dunworth (2009) provides an insightful

overview of some of the English language tests currently receiving attention. A valid and reliable post-enrolment test –

- ensures uniform assessment, thereby providing a reliable mechanism for streaming students for the purpose of subsequent provision;
- can be relatively resource-light, given a suitable online delivery and scoring platform;
- presents the possibility of a bank of tests being accumulated and used for student self-assessment; and
- enables the administering university to determine its own cut-scores according to their ‘typical student profile’ via a standard-setting exercise that would, ideally, involve stakeholders from across faculties. This option would also allow for cut scores to be set locally according to how linguistically demanding particular programmes are considered to be.

A proficiency test would measure students’ general English language competence based on generic texts and everyday language, along with their ability to structure a coherent piece of writing. While, ideally it would include the productive skills of listening and reading given the need for students to understand lectures and engage in seminars and tutorials, these are more resource intensive, lend themselves less to electronic test administration and marking and tend not to reflect the general tendency toward written assessment in undergraduate programmes. Furthermore, tests exist which, while not necessarily testing listening and speaking, nevertheless provide valid and reliable measures of overall communicative competence across the full spectrum of proficiency (see, for example, Elder & Knoch, 2009; Elder & von Randow, 2008). They may do this either via tasks that serve as *direct* measures

of language proficiency (i.e. tasks related to the kinds of skills required of test takers in the real world domain) or as *indirect* measures of proficiency.

The alternative to using a proficiency test is to use an early piece of assessed coursework, an option which, despite being more resource-intensive than an electronically managed test, has the advantages of –

- helping camouflage the fact that students are being reassessed for language post-entry;
- partially circumventing issues of discrimination;
- avoiding logistical difficulties around administering the test and maintaining test security; and
- allowing the possibility of setting cut scores locally to reflect programme/disciplinary demands.

While the fact of the written piece being assessed would help ensure that students performed to their full capacity, it would need to be completed under controlled conditions to make certain it was the students' own work. This would govern the nature and length of the written piece. More importantly, unless the assessment exercise were conducted early on, there could be a significant delay in getting help to those students in need of language development. Finally, with different course tasks being used as the basis for assessment and marked by different individuals across the university, there would be some cause for concern over inter-rater reliability, along with validity issues arising around the streaming of students for subsequent proficiency courses, were these to be delivered centrally. One possible way of

mitigating this would be to have English language tutors aligned with particular faculties/schools and tasked with delivering such courses locally rather than centrally.

Any kind of post-enrolment English language testing procedure will, of course, have cost implications; however, these can be minimised provided the test is administered electronically. Electronically administered tests, such as the Academic English Screening Test (AEST) developed by the University of Melbourne's Language Testing Research Centre (Elder & Knoch, 2009), can serve as valid and reliable tests of proficiency that are able to discriminate even between native and non-native speakers of English. Technological developments have meant that even the essay writing components of such tests can also be marked electronically, although the software required is not inexpensive. However, these and other costs associated with post-enrolment language assessment, need to be weighed against those resulting from (a) at-risk students who fail to be identified as such early on in their studies and who drop out of their undergraduate programmes due to language difficulties, and (b) there being no means through which to control access to limited English language support mechanisms, with the result that (again) those most in need fail to get adequate access to whatever supports there are available, and who, as a result, withdraw from their studies.

Conclusion

There is a clear intersection of the widening participation and English language proficiency agendas in higher education, one partly reflected in the fact that, in a number of institutions (such as the Universities of Newcastle and Southern Queensland, in Australia), access or enabling programmes and English language centres are located within a single unit. A discussion of the possible models of English language provision that might serve the needs of

groups targeted by widening participation initiatives, and particularly those of English speaking backgrounds, promises to raise interesting if challenging questions that demand creative solutions. While such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article, it is certainly the case that the nature – both in terms of content and reach – of English language provision must necessarily be governed to a large degree by available resources and the demand for those resources. What is imperative is that such resources exist, that where necessary they are tailored to suit student groups who are the target of widening participation and risk being overlooked, and that those most in need have greatest access to them. In other words, issues around post enrolment language assessment, such as those discussed here, need to be fully engaged with and consulted over by key stakeholders within universities. Only then can institutions feel confident they are meeting their ethical and educational responsibilities to those non-traditional student cohorts whose interests they espouse and whose successes or failures both during and following their studies will reflect on their graduating universities.

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