Faculty of Arts
School of Languages and Linguistics

Language Testing Research Centre

ANNUAL REPORT
SUMMARY 2016
About the LTRC

The Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) was first established at the University of Melbourne in 1990 as one of the foundation centres of the then National Languages Institute of Australia (NLIA), itself the outcome of the National Policy on Languages (NLP) (Lo Bianco, 1987).

Housed within the Faculty of Arts in the School of Languages and Linguistics (SOLL), the LTRC has since its inception been formally constituted as a University Centre with the following brief:

- to carry out and promote research and development in language testing;
- to develop tests and other appropriate proficiency measurement instruments for English and other languages;
- to evaluate programmes of language learning and teaching;
- to provide consultancy services in evaluation and testing; and
- to provide education and training in the area of language assessment.

LTRC Staff

The current staffing and management structure of the Centre is outlined in the diagram below. The Research Fellows, Administration Officer and casual staff report directly to the Centre Director, who in turn reports to the Head of School.
An alphabetical list of Centre staff and their roles for 2016:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff member</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chandran, Rohan</td>
<td>Administrative Officer (Test development specialist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czajkowski, Michelle</td>
<td>Research Fellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frost, Kellie</td>
<td>Research Fellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huisman, Annemiek</td>
<td>Research Fellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knoch, Ute</td>
<td>Director, Senior Research Fellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Hagan, Sally</td>
<td>Research Fellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weller, Kathryn</td>
<td>Research Centre Administrative Officer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LTRC Advisory Board**

An LTRC Advisory Board was formed in 2014. An Advisory Board meeting was held in July 2016. The current Advisory Board has a membership of 10 highly regarded industry representatives, external to the university and eight high level internal colleagues. A full listing of members is provided in Appendix 1 of this Annual Report. The terms of reference for the LTRC Advisory Board are as follows:

a) To provide expert external advice on current LTRC projects  
b) To comment on proposed new LTRC projects  
c) To advise on strategic opportunities for research and consultancy work  
d) To advise on current issues and trends in industry, government and education  
e) To assist with dissemination of research outcomes and applications  
f) To assist in raising awareness of LTRC expertise within the University of Melbourne, in the wider tertiary sector and beyond  
g) To review the terms of reference of the advisory group on an annual basis

**Director’s Report**

In 2016, the LTRC was again engaged in a large range of projects, making it a very productive year. Two new staff members were hired through an external advertising process. Michelle Czajkowski (LTRC Research Fellow) and Kathryn Weller (Administrative Officer) joined the team through this process, both bringing extensive relevant experience to the Centre. The LTRC also hosted a Faculty of Arts Asian Scholar, Professor Jin Yan, in the second half of the year, as well as a full year visiting scholar, Dr Jason Fan, from Fudan University. Work started on the online Professional Certificate in Language Assessment. In December, the Centre went through its five-year University research centre review, with the outcomes still outstanding at the time of publishing this report.
Summary of Activities

**Project work and research**

In 2016, funding came in for 20 projects from seventeen distinct funding bodies (both nationally and internationally). To attract future projects, staff members in the LTRC also prepared seven grant applications to major national or international funding agencies. As project work is the main business of the Centre, these projects are described in detail in the section on Projects below.

In September 2016, Dr Knoch travelled to China with Professor Tim McNamara to give a series of workshops in a summer school on language assessment organised by Shanghai Jiao Tong University. LTRC staff also presented at a number of international and local conferences, including the Language Testing Research Colloquium (the annual conference of the International Language Testing Association) in Palermo, Italy; the Ottawa & ANZAHPE conference in Perth, Australia; the ALTAANZ conference in Auckland, New Zealand. These presentations as well as all publications and reports are listed later in this report and show the impressive work done by LTRC staff in 2016.

We also had the pleasure of hosting four visiting scholars in 2016: Professor Jin Yan (from Shanghai Jiao Tong University) who came under the Faculty of Arts Asian Scholar scheme, Dr Ali van Moere (from Pearson Knowledge Technologies), Associate Professor Matthew Poehner from The Pennsylvania State University and Dr Jason Fan (Fudan University). All visitors presented workshops or lectures (or both) and all of these were advertised to the wider language testing community.

**Teaching and supervision**

In 2016, we were able to secure some internal funding from the Head of School discretionary fund to develop a Professional Certificate in Language Testing to be delivered online. This work was started in the second half of the year and will continue in 2017.

The LTRC was directly involved in the supervision of nine PhD students and one minor thesis Masters student and several Centre staff were also internal or external examiners of Honours, Masters and RHD theses.

**Engagement, leadership and service**

LTRC staff were also involved in a number of engagement activities in 2016. LTRC staff met with a number of industry clients and stakeholders over the year, to provide advice on language proficiency standards and assessments.

Several staff members were also involved in leadership and service activities. For example, Dr Ute Knoch served as Co-President of the Association of Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand (ALTAANZ) and as a member of a task force examining the English language development and standards at the University of Melbourne. Sally O’Hagan served as Editor of Papers in Language Testing and Assessment (PLTA) and Annemiek Huisman as Editorial Assistant, PLTA.

**Awards**

Several LTRC staff members have been presented with awards for their work. Kellie Frost won the Lado award for the best student paper presentation at the Language Testing Research Colloquium in Palermo, Italy and Michelle Czajkowski won the award for the best student paper presentation at the conference of the Association for Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand (ALTAANZ) in Auckland, New Zealand. Ute Knoch won a citation award for Women in Research by Thomson Reuters and Ute Knoch and Cathie Elder won the award for the best paper publication in the journal ‘Papers in Language Testing and Assessment (PLTA)’ for the years 2013-2015.
Other LTRC activities
LTRC staff members were involved in a range of other activities in 2016. Dr Sally O’Hagan again edited the ALTAANZ journal, Papers in Language Testing and Assessment (PLTA), producing two issues in 2016, one being a special issue on evaluating language assessment programs and systems in use. The Centre also coordinated the activities of the language assessment research group which met regularly in 2016.

Consultancy & Research Projects
A brief account of the projects carried out at the Centre during the 2016 period is presented below. It should be noted that while some activities are more obviously research-focused than others, the development and validation of language tests are in all cases a research exercise, drawing on both professional expertise and multiple sources of evidence. Some projects described below are ongoing and others have been brought to completion in 2016.

ARC Linkage Grant (OET Writing Criteria)
The LTRC together with colleagues in the Medical Education Unit of the Melbourne Medical School and the Departments of Nursing in the School of Health Sciences, in collaboration with our industry partner Cambridge Boxhill Language assessments, have continued working on a Linkage grant from the Australian Research Council in 2016. The project, entitled Towards improved quality of written patient records: language proficiency standards for non-native speaking health professionals, aims to establish the...
professionally relevant criteria for the OET writing tests (by examining a collection of handover documentation from real patient records and getting insights from health professionals on how they produce these records and what they value in them), applying these criteria to the OET and setting minimum standards for professional registration. In 2016, we collected the data for Phases 3 and 4, and analysed the data for those phases. The final report will be completed by June 2017, bringing the project to completion.

The Occupational English Test (OET) validation research

The Occupational English Test is a test to evaluate the English-language competency of qualified medical and health professionals who wish to practise in an English-language context. It is currently recognised by authorities regulating medical and health professions in Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. The test is taken by candidates from twelve professions: dentistry, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, physiotherapy, dietetics, occupational therapy, optometry, podiatry, radiography, speech pathology and veterinary science. An ongoing relationship between the LTRC and Cambridge Boxhill Language Assessment (formerly OET Centre), the owner of the OET with responsibility for testing operations, was established through a Memorandum of Research Understanding signed in 2007.

In 2016, the LTRC completed work on three projects. The first study was focussed on exploring a possible change to the OET Speaking test by adding a speaking task focussing on professional to professional communication across health professions. For this project, interviews and a large-scale survey were designed to elicit the type of speaking tasks undertaken by health professionals. The second project involved a trial of a revised listening and reading test with focus group interviews with test candidates about their perceptions of the test. Sally O'Hagan and Ute Knoch supervised an MA minor thesis student, Amal Khabbaz, who worked on a minor thesis in relation to the third project, examining the applicability of the checklist indicators created as part of the ARC speaking project, to the discourse produced by OET test candidates from a variety of professions. Final reports were produced by centre staff for all of these projects.

Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA)

A further core activity of the Centre is the development, administration and validation of the University’s post-entry Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA). DELA is designed to identify the English language needs of undergraduate and postgraduate international and local students immediately following their entry to the University, so that they can be guided towards appropriate language support as required. The LTRC is responsible for the test administration and marking twice yearly to incoming students. In 2016, 2361 students took the DELA at the University of Melbourne.

The LTRC also receives funding for maintenance of the DELA test battery. New versions are produced each year with the assistance of the University of Auckland, which offers a trial population for test validation purposes. A new listening version was produced in 2016. In addition, the LTRC started running analyses of live test material to examine how the tests continue to perform. This has been done in conjunction with the University of Auckland, who provide data. Short reports are written following analyses examining overall test reliability and individual item performance. Seven reports were produced in 2016.

A research study was funded in 2015 and undertaken in 2016 to re-examine the standards on the DELA. Students are currently grouped into one of three bands depending on their results. Students falling in the lowest band are required to take up additional language support offered by their faculties. The current standards were set many years ago and possibly not based on any empirical evidence. For this reason, the LTRC convened a series of standard-setting workshops in 2015 to empirically establish the cut-scores on the test. Sessions for both academics from a range of faculties and language support staff for reading, listening and writing were convened. The data suggest that the cut-scores may have to be changed somewhat. A final report on the project has been published.
**Academic English Screening Test (AEST)**

The online Academic English Screening Test (AEST) is designed to provide a means of identifying those students who are likely to experience difficulties in coping with the English language demands of their academic study. The test can be used as an alternative to the more time consuming DELA. The test was designed on the assumption of universal testing rather than targeting of particular categories of student.

In 2016, three Australian universities continued to use the AEST under site licence from the LTRC.

**Australian Education Assessment Services (AEAS) English proficiency tests**

Australian Education Assessment Services (AEAS) is a company that offers a testing service comprising general ability, mathematical reasoning and English proficiency tests for Australian primary and secondary private schools accepting enrolments from international students and wishing to gauge their readiness for academic study in Australia. In 2016, the LTRC completed the development of one new version of the Year 10-12 Listening, Vocabulary and Reading tests and one new version of the Year 7-9 Listening, Vocabulary and Reading tests. Additionally, the LTRC commenced work on the development of a further new test version in 2016 – one version of the Year 4-6 Listening, Vocabulary and Reading tests – due for delivery in 2017.

**TOEFL research projects**

The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is the most widely used English language test in the world, used principally for the selection of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds for entry to higher education in the United States and elsewhere. Centre staff and associates have a long history of association with the TOEFL program through service on the TOEFL Committee of Examiners and the TOEFL Board, as well as through the conduct of TOEFL-related research. In 2016, LTRC worked on two research grants.

Using a verbal reporting methodology, the first study is designed to investigate the strategic behaviours displayed by test takers across three proficiency levels when completing the TOEFL iBT (internet Based Test) integrated writing task. It is anticipated that the results will build on our current understanding of the skill integration processes used by second language learners at different levels of ability and proficiency with the view to (1) providing validity evidence for the TOEFL iBT integrated writing task, (2) arriving at a theoretical model of skill integration, and (3) providing insights to further inform and improve current information processing models.

The second TOEFL study examines how content from stimulus materials is processed and integrated into oral performances by test takers across three levels of proficiency on a TOEFL-iBT reading and listening to speaking integrated task. An innovative discourse analytic approach is being used to provide a thick analysis of content produced by test takers in task responses, which is being combined with an analysis of verbal reports provided by test takers in relation to the task. Findings from the study will provide theoretical insights into the nature of the reading- and listening-to-speak construct, particularly the way in which strategies interact with comprehension skills, speaking ability and task characteristics to impact the discourse produced in speaking performances.

**Placement tests for the School of Languages and Linguistics and the Asia Institute**

At the University of Melbourne, the LTRC oversees the administration and continued maintenance of the Faculty of Arts placement test battery for nine languages (French, Arabic, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Indonesian, Chinese and Japanese) which have been operational since the beginning of 2014. The LTRC team continues to work closely with language staff to continually improve and fine-tune the test and associated procedures. In 2016, the LTRC conducted a standard-setting meeting to reset the cut-scores for the Italian module of the test as a new level was added to the Italian programme.
**IELTS**

The IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test is one of the most widely used English Language proficiency tests in the world, used for selection of students to universities in English-speaking countries as well as for other processes such as skilled migration. In 2015, work was completed on a grant-funded project, entitled Transitioning from university to the workplace: Stakeholder perceptions of academic and professional writing demands which aimed to gain insight into changes in writing demands at the transition point from university study to the workforce. The investigators on this study included three LTRC and SOLL staff members (Dr Ute Knoch, Dr Susy Macqueen, Dr Neomy Storch) and Dr John Pill from the American University in Beirut and Dr Lyn May from Queensland University of Technology. A draft final report was published in early 2016 on the IELTS website.

**British Council Aptis Test**

The LTRC conducted a review of the control item system used by the Aptis test, the online language proficiency test designed by the British Council. In this test, speaking and writing performances are not routinely double-rated and for this reason, raters encounter control items at regular intervals which are designed to ensure that raters are continuously re-standardised and rating to standard. The system therefore has a double function, one of quality control and one of ongoing rater training. The report looked at three areas, namely (a) selection, presentation and retention of control items, (b) standardisation and (c) quality control. The results of the study showed that the Aptis team have put in place a number of well-thought-out strategies for the selection and presentation of the control items. Possible efficiencies in administration could be gained by automatizing the suspension and restandardisation process for the raters, and recommendations were made along those lines. A final report was presented to the British Council.

In 2016, the LTRC was successful in attracting an international competitive grant from the Aptis test research grant program. The project commenced in late 2016, with a focus on the Aptis for Teachers speaking test. The aim of the study is to examine the speaking processes and strategies elicited by the Aptis for Teachers speaking tasks, and to explore the perceptions of test takers and teacher educators concerning the appropriateness of the tasks as measures of classroom-ready speaking skills in the Australian context. The project will provide important empirical evidence relevant to validity claims in relation to the speaking package of Aptis for Teachers, as well as insights into key stakeholder perceptions of the test.

**GEPT**

In 2014, the LTRC was awarded a research grant from the GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) in Taiwan to link the GEPT writing suite of tests to the Common European Framework of Reference. Work on this project started in 2014. The linking study was conducted according to the stages and methods set out in the manual Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2009). The final report was published in 2016.

**NAPLAN**

Along with several other applied linguistics and linguistics staff in the School of Languages and Linguistics, the LTRC was successful in applying for two grants to fund a study with the aim of investigating the impact of NAPLAN testing on children in remote Indigenous communities from a range of perspectives. The study was funded by a Collier Charitable Trust grant and a Faculty of Arts grant. The findings from the study have been written up in a paper and submitted for publication in 2016.
**CALDER project**

The CALDER (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Ethics and Research Resources) project brings together a team of clinicians (University of Melbourne and St Vincent’s hospital), health professional communication experts, linguists and applied linguists, to identify how the research consent processes used in hospitals can be improved for older patients from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Clinicians at St Vincent’s Hospital highlighted this issue of older Italian patients who comprise a significant proportion of their patient population and have difficulty understanding the standard patient information provided to them when participating in a research project/clinical trial. Our experience in clinical research ethics has demonstrated that the majority of researchers do not have the funds required to have research participant information and consent forms translated, nor to make use of interpreters. As a result, it is clear that significant sections of Melbourne’s patient populations are being excluded from the opportunity to participate in research. This is of concern for a number of reasons. Previous studies have provided good evidence that involvement in clinical trials decreases perioperative risks for older Australians. Also, by excluding large sections of the population from trials it becomes impossible to apply trial results reliably across the whole population. This study assesses the feasibility of developing linguistically and culturally appropriate written and audio-visual research information for patients and their family members. The results from this study can then be used to expand the program to other culturally and linguistically diverse groups. 2016 saw the completion of the project with two peer-reviewed papers published on the findings.

**Test Development for Japanese School Language Assessment**

The LTRC has entered into a consultancy agreement with a company in Japan that delivers English language assessments to school children at different levels of proficiency, to take on a portion of the test development for this client as they are struggling to find sufficient native speakers of English in Japan. In 2016, the LTRC developed a number of assessments at different levels for a suite of assessments and further work has been agreed for 2017.

**NAATI**

Following a report by Hale et al. (2012), which recommended that potential candidates for NAATI interpreting and translating exams take screening tests in English and/or the LOTE (Language Other Than English) they will be working with before they take a NAATI exam, the National Accreditation Authority for Interpreters and Translators (NAATI) approached the LTRC with the request to conduct a feasibility study of using such online screening tests for these purposes. The LTRC started working on the report, examining possible tests for English screening in 2015. The final reports (on English and LOTE screening test respectively) were delivered in March 2016. Following up from these reports, LTRC convened a workshop with key stakeholders from the translating and interpreting profession to establish minimum language proficiency standards for the translating and interpreting profession and to canvas feedback on the recommended screening test options. The workshops were held in late October 2016 and a final report was delivered in December 2016.

A further project commissioned by NAATI relates to proficiency testing of competence in languages other than English of public servants working in customer service positions and who may be asked to draw on their LOTE to talk to customers. The LTRC has been tasked to develop such a test, to trial it and to develop a rating scheme for the test. The test materials were completed in late 2016 and delivered to NAATI.

**Language Assessment Consultancy**

In 2016, the LTRC worked with four organisations on benchmarking the language assessments used for direct entry into undergraduate programs in English-medium universities. LTRC used various methods of
benchmarking, including a comparison to test scores on English language proficiency tests as well as to key benchmark levels on language frameworks.

**Pearson Projects**

In late 2016 the LTRC was successfully awarded two research grants from Pearson Education.

The aim of the first study is to explore the nature and extent of test preparation for Pearson Test of English (Academic) and any links between test preparation activities and improved test performance. The study's findings will offer insights into the ways candidates prepare for the PTE Academic in the Australian context, where other tests (e.g. IELTS) have been dominant for many decades. Of particular interest to the field, is the question of whether a different test like the PTE (Academic), with design features that set it apart from tests like IELTS and TOEFL, will generate different kinds of washback from that documented in published research on other language tests.

The second study will examine the perceptions and actions of different stakeholders in the field of accounting in relation to the use of PTE Academic as part of migrant selection processes in Australia. We will investigate different stakeholders’ experiences of the PTE and understandings of PTE scores, and the ways in which these experiences and understandings influence decision making and actions to produce test consequences. Little is known about how stakeholders perceive current score requirements for skilled migration in Australia, nor about how their behaviours are influenced by their experiences and perceptions of tests and test scores. Study outcomes will inform Pearson’s engagement efforts with stakeholder groups, provide evidence of impact relevant to PTE validity claims, and contribute to theoretical efforts in the field of language testing to better explain the complex and multifaceted effects of test use in such high stakes policy contexts.
LTRC Finances

In 2016, funding was received for 20 projects from seventeen distinct funding bodies (both nationally and internationally).

Income from research, test development and consultancy projects was reported to the University against the following three categories:

- Category 1: Australian Competitive Grants
- Category 2: Other public sector income
- Category 3: Industry and other research income

The LTRC main areas of expenditure in 2016 were related to payment of staff salaries and employment of casual staff and research assistance and also the Centre’s contribution to university overheads. The LTRC accounts are part of the budget of the School of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne.
LTRC Publications 2016

Publications


Project reports


Presentations


### Appendix 1: LTRC Advisory Board members 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Helen Zimmerman (Chair)    | Group General Manager, Government and Stakeholder Relations, Navitas English  
                               President, International Education Association of Australia |
| Sue Blundell                | Executive Director, English Australia                                      |
| Dr Russell Cross            | Senior Lecturer in Language and Literacy Education, Melbourne Graduate School of Education |
| Associate Professor Cathie Elder | Associate Professor, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne |
| Professor Sue Elliott       | Deputy Provost  
                               Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Engagement)                                      |
| Andrew Ferguson             | President, Modern Language Teachers Association of Victoria               |
| John Firth                  | CEO, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA); member of ACARA |
| Robert Foote                | National Manager Accreditation, NAATI                                      |
| Dina Guest                  | Executive Director, Learning and Teaching Division, Early Childhood and School Education Group, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development |
| Anna Ivanova                | Head of Development, Australian Defence Force School of Languages          |
| Kathe Kirby                 | Executive Director, AsiaLink and Asia Education Foundation                |
| Professor Joe LoBianco      | Professor, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne |
| Professor Alfredo Martinez-Exposito | Head of School, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne |
| Professor Tim McNamara      | Professor Applied Linguistics, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne |
| Mark Melican                | President, VicTESOL                                                       |
| Associate Professor Angela Scarino | Director, Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, University of South Australia |
| Sujata Stead                | CEO, Cambridge Boxhill Language Assessment                                 |
| Professor Gillian Wigglesworth | Professor Applied Linguistics, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne |
| Associate Professor Robyn Woodward-Kron | Associate Professor in Healthcare Communication, Medical Education Unit, Melbourne Medical School, University of Melbourne |