

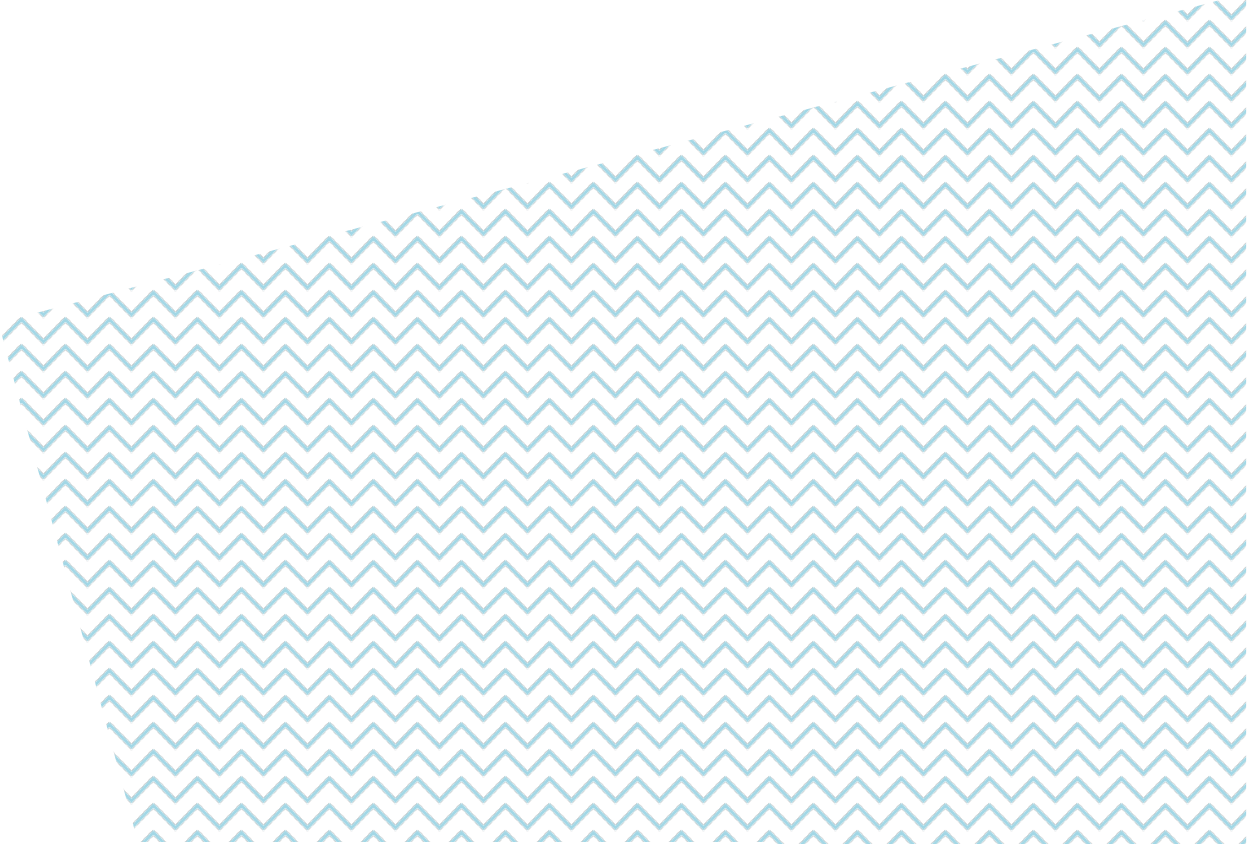


The History of the LTRC

1990-
2020



Alan Davies, Founding Director



Written by Cathie Elder and Tim McNamara, for the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Centre celebrated in November 2020

The Language Testing Research Centre

University of Melbourne, Australia

The Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) at the University of Melbourne has earned an international reputation for its contributions to language testing, language assessment and language programme evaluation over three decades. That it came into existence at all, and that it has survived for 30 years, are each a minor miracle.

First, its existence. The founding of the Centre late in 1989 was a direct result of the landmark *National Policy on Languages* (Lo Bianco 1987), sponsored by the late Senator Susan Ryan, Education Minister in the Hawke Government. Through the course of 1988 and 1989 Lo Bianco negotiated the setting up of a network of university research centres in various aspects of applied linguistics relevant to the policy. On the face of it, there was no reason why there should be a language testing centre at Melbourne as part of the network as there was already an established language testing activity in Brisbane under Professor David Ingram. Ingram's Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR) had introduced the American tradition of direct face to face oral assessment within the teaching of English in migration contexts. But Lo Bianco's loyalty to his language policy mentor, Dr Terry Quinn, the Director of the Horwood Language Centre at the University of Melbourne, and the research interests in language testing of Tim McNamara, the head of the recently established graduate Applied Linguistics program there, meant that Lo Bianco managed to find a way to support a Melbourne bid to be included.

The ultimate success of the Melbourne bid depended on two things. First, the leading figure in language testing in the United Kingdom, Dr Alan Davies of the University of Edinburgh, who had been a Visiting Scholar at Melbourne for several months in 1988, agreed to come to Melbourne for a three-year period as founding Director of what was to be known as the Language Testing Unit (later the Language Testing Research Centre). Second, support from the Dean for the establishment of the Unit was on the condition that it would involve no financial support from the University. It would be entirely self-funded, initially through a modest grant from the Commonwealth tied to particular projects, and subsequently through further externally funded research and development projects sometimes brokered by the coordinating agency, the National Languages Institute of Australia (headed by Joe Lo Bianco) but increasingly brought in exclusively by the efforts of the staff of the Unit. That is, although located within the University of Melbourne, test development, consultancy and research projects at the LTRC were funded primarily from external sources from the outset.



Left to right: Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, Professor Tim McNamara, Dr Alan Davies

This unusual relationship between the University and one of its research centres, created one of the conditions for the character of the LTRC, which make its survival seem miraculous. It was allowed for many years to operate relatively independently, somewhat like a small business, whose main relationships were with its many clients (State and Federal Governments, school systems, universities, professional bodies, international institutions and agencies) rather than with the University. Nevertheless it had to meet University requirements geared to traditional academic research and teaching, not to the needs of an entrepreneurial research centre competing in a specialised market place. The University at the outset was also unsure what to make of the leadership of the Centre: an enterprising junior lecturer (McNamara) and a very British professor, whose dry sense of humour was often lost on the administrators with whom he had to deal. Alan Davies's mixture of informality, sharp critical judgement, encouragement of junior staff and democratic administrative style, melded with an Australian energy and idealism among the staff, was to set a stamp on the character of the Centre. Ultimately the Centre was left to itself, a kind of family business, largely ignored; this had the advantage of allowing it the freedom to determine its own fate, while still being subject to the whims of university policy.

As projects came in, staffing became an issue, and a source of recruits was found in the graduates of the MA in Applied Linguistics, many of whom went on to do PhDs in language testing while working in the Centre, often drawing on data from Centre projects. These included Cathie Elder, Annie Brown, Tom Lumley, Kieran O'Loughlin, Noriko Iwashita, Kathryn Hill, and, more recently, Sally O'Hagan, Luke Harding, John Pill, and Kellie Frost, all of them internationally known and regarded figures in language testing research. The role of the Centre in generating their research careers is remarkable; given its inability to guarantee secure employment, owing to the way it lived from year to year on uncertain funding with no university underwriting, most left for more secure academic positions elsewhere. Centre Directors (Alan Davies, Tim McNamara, Cathie Elder, Liz Hamp-Lyons) also came and went from what was a taxing role requiring constant revenue generation.

During the Centre's first decade of research, two signature tests helped to sustain the Centre's operations. One was the Occupational English Test (OET) designed for the Australian Government by Tim McNamara in the 1980s for overseas-trained health professionals seeking to register and practise in Australia and forming the basis for his PhD research. The test has since been acquired by Cambridge Boxhill Language Assessment and is now recognised by health authorities in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Dubai and Singapore. Developing new test versions for each of the 12 health professions serviced by the OET generated an ongoing, albeit fluctuating, stream of income for the LTRC for twenty odd years, as well as test development and validation experience for Centre staff (Lis Grove, Luke Harding and others). The OET was also the focus of influential research into the theory and practice of specific purpose language assessment testing.

The second signature test, the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA), originally designed by Annie Brown and Tom Lumley, has been used at the University of Melbourne to identify and support students considered at risk with their academic English ability since the early 1990s. It addressed an issue that has assumed greater importance as the number of international students in Australian universities has grown: how to identify students who on the one hand have met university English language entry requirements, but who nevertheless are found to struggle in meeting the linguistic demands of university study. DELA was one of the first exemplars of what is now called post-entry English language assessment (PELA), which has since become the norm within Australian universities catering for linguistically diverse student populations. Cathie Elder, moving to a post at the University of Auckland, adopted DELA as a component of the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) program at Auckland, thereby initiating an enduring relationship between the two universities. Data drawn from DELA and DELNA administrations has yielded doctorates in testing academic writing (Lumley, Knoch) and listening (Harding). Multiple versions of DELA and, more recently, a shorter online derivative, the Academic English Screening Test (AEST), continue to be produced at the Centre and licensed to tertiary institutions across Australia and beyond, an example of the Centre's role as catalyst for useful and progressive innovation with international impact.

The Centre's need to generate all of its own funding has created challenges. The usual research funding sources available to university researchers such as the schemes of the Australian Research Council (ARC)

were effectively unavailable until recently, as they assume staff time is already funded by the university employer as part of the research activity of the staff member, and also require project investigators to have employment for the period of the grant. Neither of these assumptions has been true for Centre staff: all salaries needed to be earned from externally resourced projects, and employment was mostly through a series of short-term contracts. These strictures have in some sense turned into a strength, leading the Centre to develop a strong network of relationships with educational providers and language testing agencies not only in Australia but throughout the world. Collaboration with other institutions has thus been a constant feature of the Centre's work. An early collaborative endeavour was the Australian Assessment of Communicative English Skills (access:) test conducted jointly with Macquarie University in response to a promise by the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke to fast-track the entry of Chinese immigrants to Australia in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Jill Wigglesworth joined the Centre to work on this project and headed up the Melbourne test development team. The test, administered both locally and internationally, was designed for both pencil and paper or computer delivery. Comparing these different modalities and their effect on candidate performance was the focus of Kieran O'Loughlin's doctoral dissertation.

In the early 2000s, the Centre was commissioned by Oxford University Press to work with them on the development of the prototype version of the Oxford English Language Test (OELT), designed to measure the learning achievements of adult students of English around the world. Ute Knoch, Centre Director since 2012, was recruited from the University of Auckland to work on this project, which also provided data for an award-winning Master thesis by Kellie Frost.

Since the 1990s the Centre has worked with Angela Scarino and staff at the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures at the University of South Australia on a number of national policy-driven initiatives relating to the study of Asian languages in Australian schools. These have been influential in documenting learning achievements and setting realistic expectations for what can be achieved by learners from different backgrounds and with varying levels of exposure to the target language. Partnerships of this kind have allowed the Centre to involve itself in large-scale testing exercises while maintaining a skeleton staff, perhaps one reason for its survival in the face of shrinking public funding for research in the languages arena.

Apart from the projects mentioned above, the Centre has developed a range of tests in English and other languages targeting particular populations – immigrants, young learners, teachers, tour guides, pilots and air traffic controllers. Funding, often acquired through competitive tender, has come from various sources. More recently the University has funded online placement tests for students enrolling for university language study (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian and Spanish); the Federal and State governments have supported research into outcomes based assessment frameworks and their relevance for the local context; national accreditation authorities have requested the Centre's advice on test design and test use; private testing companies and universities overseas have sought assistance with writing of test specifications and items. The Centre has also undertaken major contract research for large international testing agencies such as the Educational Testing Service, Cambridge Assessment English, Pearson and the British Council, supporting the development and validation of their large-scale, commercial English tests. The Centre has hosted a number of leading international visiting scholars over the years, including from Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Finland, Israel, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States and Sweden.

The LTRC has always punched above its weight with regard to academic presentations and publications in peer-reviewed academic journals, helping to shape theory and practice in areas such as: performance testing and Rasch analysis (McNamara 1996, McNamara, Knoch and Fan 2019); test validity and validation (Davies and Elder 2005, Knoch and Chapelle 2018); test bias, fairness, ethics and social consequences (Davies 1997, Elder 1997, McNamara and Ryan 2011); rater and interlocutor behaviour (Brown 2003, Brown and Hill 1998, Knoch 2011, Lumley 2002); task-based assessment (Iwashita et al. 2001, Brown et al. 2005); assessment in higher education contexts (Elder 2012, Elder and Read 2015; Knoch and Elder 2013, O'Hagan 2014, O'Loughlin 2011); classroom-based assessment (Hill and McNamara 2012; Knoch and Macqueen 2017); the testing of language/s for specific purposes (Elder 2016, Hamp-Lyons and Lumley 2001, Knoch and Macqueen 2019, McNamara 1996, Pill 2016); policy formation and the social dimensions of language assessment more generally (Frost and McNamara 2018, McNamara and Roever 2006, Roever and Wigglesworth 2019). Centre

staff and associates serve or have served as editors and/or reviewers for all the major language assessment journals in the field and have been recognised with multiple international awards: the Robert Lado Memorial Award for best conference paper at the International Language Testing Research Colloquium (1996,1997, 1998, 2000, 2016), the International Language Testing Association's Best Article Award (1996, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2016), the Caroline Clapham Best Masters Thesis Award (2000, 2008, 2011), the Jacqueline Ross Dissertation Award (2002, 2005), the Sage/ILTA Best Book Award (2006, 2019), the TOEFL Outstanding Young Scholar Award (2014), the Cambridge ILTA Distinguished Achievement Award (2015, 2020). Centre staff have played leading roles in international language testing organisations, including organising the main international conference in the field as well as Australian and New Zealand conferences, and serving on the boards of major testing companies.

In addition to its research achievements, the LTRC has contributed significantly to building language assessment literacy both locally and in the wider region. These efforts began with the *Dictionary of Language Testing* (Davies, Brown, Elder, Hill, Lumley and McNamara 1999), which afforded an opportunity for new staff to educate themselves by writing and workshopping entries and ultimately served as a reference text for the field. This capacity building exercise continued with *Mark My Words, Assessing second and foreign language skills* (Davies, Brown, Elder, Evans, Grove, Iwashita and McNamara 1996) a set of 6 introductory teaching videos in which Centre staff and other language assessment practitioners drew on their experience with particular projects to elucidate key concepts and practices in language assessment. The series has been widely used in language assessment courses around the world and is now freely available at <https://www.iltaonline.com/page/MarkMyWords>. *Melbourne Papers in Language Testing (MPLTA)*, founded in 1992, served as a publishing outlet not just for staff of the LTRC but also for many Masters and PhD students in Melbourne and beyond. In 2010, on the occasion of the LTRC's 20th anniversary, MPLTA was rebranded as *Papers in Language Testing and Assessment (PLTA)* becoming the official peer-reviewed organ of the newly formed *Association for Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand (ALTAANZ)* a thriving regional organisation instigated by the LTRC to promote best practice in language testing and assessment in educational and professional settings.

LTRC staff are also involved in teaching and research supervision. The University has launched an online [Professional Certificate in Language Assessment](#) designed and taught by LTRC staff to language teachers and other test users interested in learning more about designing and evaluating language assessment tools. Funding for a PhD project titled '[Expanding the construct of second language assessments](#),' born of a collaboration between the University of Melbourne and Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) has recently become available.

Gradually, following a number of highly favourable external reviews, the remarkable achievement of the Centre has become more widely recognised within the University. Its research record is beyond reproach and its entrepreneurial character, originally viewed with indifference or indeed suspicion, is now seen as well-aligned with the University's commitment to public engagement and its policy push to secure funding from sources outside the official research schemes. The University and the Faculty have agreed to underwrite the positions of Director and Deputy Director of the Centre, providing them with ongoing employment and access to research supports such as sabbatical leave and ARC grant schemes. The Centre has finally been welcomed into the fold, which is gratifying after an orphan existence for so long.

From very modest beginnings, the Centre is now one of the world's leading research centres in language testing and assessment outside of commercial language testing organisations. Its high professional standards, its independence, its vast experience in diverse fields and the innovative quality of its research have driven this reputation, which we celebrate in its 30th anniversary year.

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