SCANA: Supporting Students' Academic Language Development at The University of Sydney

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Abstract

In 2021, the Learning Hub at The University of Sydney launched the Student Communication and Needs Analysis (SCANA). This program of support consists of a screening language task and associated support interventions in first year units of study (UoS). The self-marking online screening tool developed by the Language Testing Research Centre at The University of Melbourne classifies students into three bands, with Band 1 identifying students at risk of academic failure due to insufficient language proficiency. All students in selected UoS are encouraged to take SCANA and offered academic language support according to their needs. Students identified in Band 1 are advised to attend discipline-specific support targeting the language issues associated with written assignments. These students are also informed about other offerings, such as one-on-one consultations, generic academic workshops, peer-facilitated programs, and self-access resources. Students in Bands 2 and 3 are also offered options according to their level. The results from Semester 1 2022 showed that students identified in Band 1 who attended at least two support workshops obtained, on average, 12 more points in their final grade and were up to five times less likely to fail than those in Band 1 who did not attend any workshops. These promising results have motivated faculty to expand the program from seven UoS in 2021 to 32 UoS in 2023.

Keywords

PELA, Screening tasks, Academic language development, Support interventions, Written assignments, Adjunct tutorials

Introduction

With increased access to higher education, the need to support students' development of academic language has become evident. While discussion of language skills tends to focus on international students, a diverse range of cohorts—including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with a disability, students from remote areas, and non-recent school leavers, amongst many others—can benefit from further academic language support. In this context, universities in Australia and New Zealand have been implementing Post Entry Language Assessments (PELAs) to identify those students most in need of support (Dunworth, 2009; Harris, 2013). With an international student cohort reaching nearly 40% and a further 15% of students from equity backgrounds (Clarke et al., 2022), The University of Sydney is taking measures to ensure that all students are supported to flourish at the University. A thematic review on the quality of English language pathways and support recommended the inclusion of processes for diagnostic evaluation of English skills in first year units of study (UoS) with the intention of providing additional language development support to students identified as at risk (Academic Board/University Executive, 2020). The resulting initiative, consisting of the implementation of a diagnostic tool and an associated program of support, was called the Student Communication and Needs Analysis (SCANA).

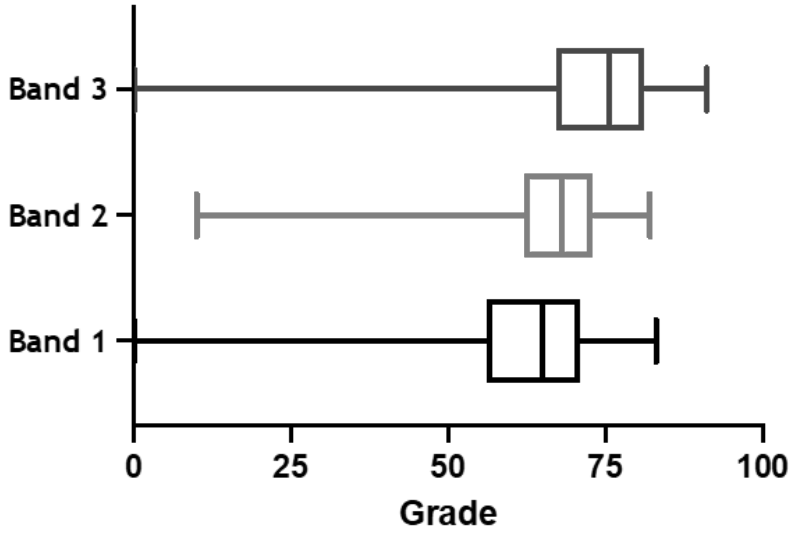
Resources

The selected evaluation instrument was the Academic English Screening Test (AEST) developed by the Language Testing Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. The online self-marking tool

consists of two tasks: text completion and speed reading, taking no longer than 30 minutes in total. The tool has been extensively validated and has been found to correlate proficiency in English as an additional language with academic performance (Knoch et al., 2016). The AEST classifies students into three bands, with students in Band 1 requiring the highest level of academic language support. University of Sydney student results showed that SCANA correctly identified students at risk—students in Band 1 attained, on average, lower final grades than those in Bands 2 and 3 (regardless of whether they attended the support workshops), as shown in Figure 1. While the tool identifies a need for academic language support, insights are not provided into the aspects of academic language with which students need support. Therefore, an informal needs analysis is required for each cohort to design the appropriate pedagogical interventions.

Figure 1

Distribution of Student Grades by SCANA Bands



The SCANA initiative is delivered by a management team including the Learning Hub (LH) Director who—among other responsibilities—reports on and promotes SCANA at the higher levels of the University. An education services manager ensures adequate financial and logistical resources are available for the SCANA deployment and oversees two staff members: an educational designer, who administers the SCANA website and ensures students are able to take SCANA and receive timely results, and a data analyst who processes information about results, attendance, and impact. The LH Lead (Academic Language Learning) liaises with lecturers and coordinates the design and delivery of quality pedagogical support interventions by four Learning Success Advisors (LSAs). This team meets weekly throughout the year to plan, coordinate, and troubleshoot the SCANA implementation.

The pilot

In Semester 2 (S2) 2021, seven UoS were selected through which to implement SCANA. Two initial UoS in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences were selected, based on identified students' needs and the desire of lecturers to implement support for their students. Five other UoS were added to the pilot at the request of the UoS coordinators, based on the identified need for academic language support evidenced by students' oral and written communication skills. In an initial meeting, the UoS coordinators shared their perceptions of the most pressing academic language needs of their cohorts with the LH lead and the LSAs. They were also asked to share assignment instructions, rubrics, and annotated samples of students' past papers. Many coordinators granted

access to their Learning Management System UoS site, which provided meaningful insights into students' needs. Based on this information, LH staff designed synchronous workshops and self-access online resources to develop the academic language aspects of each unit's assessment.

To introduce SCANA to students, LH staff visited the first lecture to encourage them to undertake the task and attend the support offered. This consisted of 10 adjunct tutorials focusing on areas such as reading strategies, appropriate paraphrasing, and structuring assignments, among others.

The uptake of the non-compulsory SCANA task in the pilot was slightly over 40% of the target cohort (*n*=2,334) and has remained around the same level, to date. Almost 40% of the students who participated in the activity were classified in Band 1 (*n*=368), representing 15% of the targeted cohort. However, attendance at the adjunct tutorials started at approximately 20% of students in Band 1 (*n*=81) and gradually decreased to 5% (*n*=21) by week 12. However, those who attended found the workshops extremely useful in clarifying the expectations of written assignments and providing insights into how to systematically address their assignment questions. The lecturers were also extremely pleased with the program as even the UoS surveys reflected an improvement in the items related to support.

Figure 2

Wordcloud of Student Feedback Forms on SCANA Support Workshops

Lessons learnt

Through anonymous surveys and other forms of student communication, a number of issues that hindered the uptake of SCANA and its follow-up support were identified. First, despite receiving a privacy notice indicating that their lecturers would not have access to their SCANA results, students

feared that being identified as needing support would lead to being marked more harshly. Second, the scheduling of the adjunct tutorials often clashed with students' other classes and commitments. Third, the burden of 10 extra classes was perceived as excessive and reduced their time available for assignment completion.

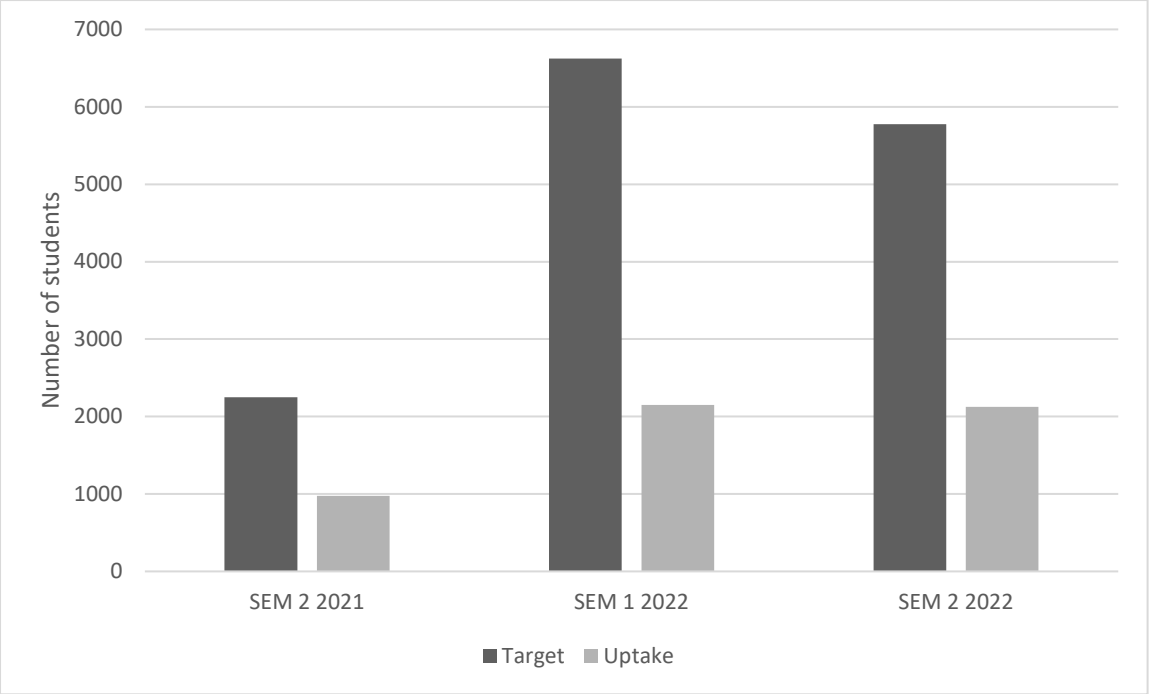
Based on this feedback, the number of workshops was reduced from 10 to a maximum of three, scheduled two weeks before submission deadlines to maximise interest. A scheduling bot was created to identify the time slots with the highest potential for attendance and multimodal forms of support were also implemented.

SCANA reach and impact in 2022

In 2022, SCANA was implemented in 30 UoS (14 in S1 and 16 in S2), targeting more than 12,000 students. The uptake of the task was nearly 35% (*n*=4,278). Of those students, more than 1,000 were identified as at risk of academic failure due to low academic English proficiency. The lower percentage in uptake compared to that of the pilot was due to the inclusion of SCANA in UoS with large enrolments but with a low weight written assessment. This means that as support would have little impact on their final mark, students were not as inclined to take SCANA or attend the single support workshop offered. However, we included it with the purpose of raising awareness of generic LH support.

Figure 3

SCANA Target Population and Uptake from Semester 2 2021 to Semester 2 2022



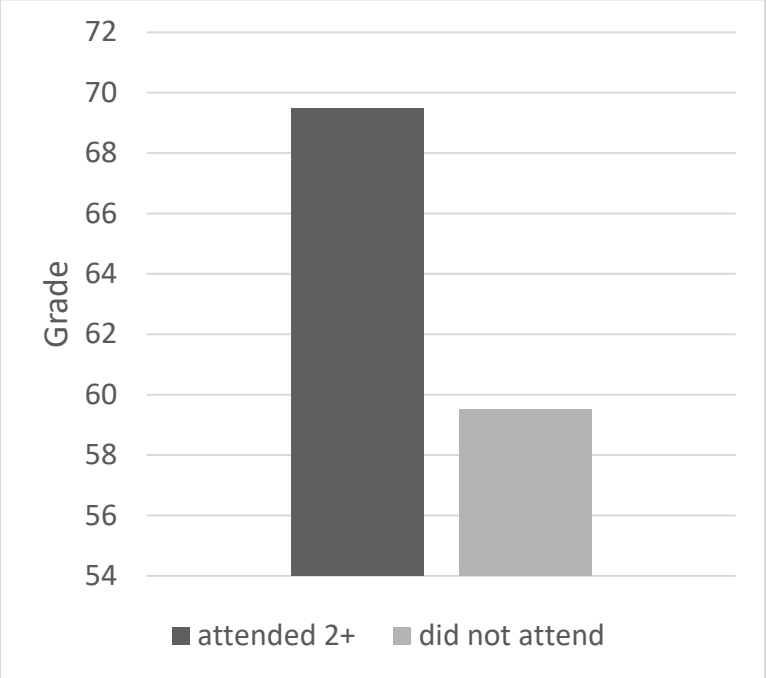
A clear improvement in 2022 was that uptake of discipline-specific support nearly tripled from S1 to S2. Attendance to the adjunct workshops increased from 304 to 795. This was achieved through constant promotion from UoS lecturers and tutors, automated emails, and direct messaging from LH staff, including workshop facilitators. It is important to note that attendance included students from all bands. Although students in Band 1 were strongly encouraged to attend and received direct communications, many of them did not take advantage of the opportunity. Unfortunately, research shows that students who need the most help are the ones less likely to seek it (Clegg et al., 2006; Grayson et al., 1998). Yet, the analysis of attendance records and final grades from S2 shows an

improvement in academic performance for students from all bands, suggesting that the support workshops are not remedial but developmental. Likewise, while engagement with discipline-specific self-access resources was negligible in S1, in S2 the link to one resource was used 80 times. Students provided positive feedback on the usefulness of the resource to understand the assignment task. The higher engagement was likely due to the placement of the link to the resource on the assignment instruction page, which made support available at the time students were more likely to engage with it.

Most importantly, analysis of the impact of SCANA support on the results of students in Band 1 is promising. The final marks of the students in Band 1 who attended the support workshops were compared with the grades of those who did not. In S1 2022, attendees scored, on average, 12.1 points higher. In addition, students who attended at least two workshops were five times less likely to fail their UoS than those who did not attend any workshops. This analysis shows that as few as two targeted workshops can have a significant impact on students' academic performance.

Figure 4

Average Final Grade of Students in Band 1 who Attended at Least Two SCANA Support Workshops Compared to That of Those who did not Attend Any



SCANA expansion in 2023 and beyond

While the initial approach to recruitment of UoS for SCANA was to contact individual lecturers who might have identified a need for additional academic language support, the 2022 results have garnered interest from key personnel at the University, including faculty deans. This has made a top-down approach possible. Two faculties and two schools have decided to implement SCANA in key UoS in their areas. In S1 2023, 32 strategically selected UoS are implementing SCANA with the aim of capturing the largest possible number of students. Collaboration with lecturers has been streamlined to facilitate the needs analysis stage and student feedback sought through different channels confirms the positive impact of this initiative.

This rapid expansion poses challenges regarding the scalability of the program, especially in the design and delivery of discipline-specific support, which is the most resource-intensive aspect of

the initiative. However, the potential gains in student retention and completion can justify additional resources. Other avenues to complement support are also being explored, including the expansion of accessible online resources and the provision of artificial intelligence tools that not only offer proofreading advice, but can also help students develop their academic writing skills. Using a multimodal approach to academic language support following principles of Universal Design for Learning (Gordon et al., 2014) can maximise engagement from students from diverse cohorts. Increased access to higher education means universities have the responsibility to support all students to develop the skills needed to succeed and thrive. The approach taken at The University of Sydney to the identification and provision of academic language support and development to students, at all levels of proficiency, has shown to be effective and can serve as a model for other institutions.

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