

# TEST PREPARATION RESEARCH

Assessment and Evaluation Group  
Queen's University



January 2015 - Volume 6

## UPDATE FROM CANADA

*Andrea King*, MEd Candidate, *Hong Wang*, Co-investigator  
Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

### University Internationalization

In an age of increased demand for globalized education, the internationalization of university campuses has become a ubiquitous world-wide phenomenon. Canada, in its efforts to maintain and expand upon its role in this trend, has been working towards meeting future education needs on international, national, and local institutional levels.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) found in their 2014 *AUCC Internationalization Survey* that 96% of Canadian university respondents (consisting of 97 public and private not-for-profit universities and university degree-level colleges in Canada) include internationalization as part of their strategic planning, and 80% identify it as one of their *top five* planning priorities (AUCC, 2014). Also included in the AUCC report were figures citing the enrollment of 89,000 full-time international students in undergraduate programs and 44,000 full-time international students in graduate programs, totalling 11% and 44% of all campus undergraduates and graduates respectively (AUCC, 2014).

Beyond those numbers, an expectation of university internationalization continues to rise, as significant public policy measures place Canada's internationalization at the forefront. Most recently, in January 2014, the federal government Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (DFATD) issued Canada's first-ever national strategy for international education, known as *Canada's International Education Strategy* policy. The policy has set targets with Canadian provinces and

80% of Canadian university respondents identify internationalization as one of their *top five* planning priorities (AUCC, 2014)

territories, as well as tertiary institutions and other educational stakeholders, to attract international academics at more than double the rate from past years in order to reach the base goal of more than 450,000 international students and researchers by 2022 (DFATD, 2014).

### Test Preparation in Canada

With internationalization high on federal and provincial/territorial agendas, proficiency assessment is of utmost concern for higher education academic requirements and admission standards. Where English is the sole medium of classroom interaction, it is an absolute necessity for schools to obtain an accurate picture of students' readiness to participate in academic discourse.

Currently, some of the more widely accepted tests of English proficiency in Canada include: the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Training Systems (IELTS), the CanTest, the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB), the Pearson Test of English (PTE), and the Canadian Academic English Language Test (CAEL). If applicants do not meet the minimum required scores on such high-stakes tests,

university bridging programs or referral to local language school partners for language support or test preparation courses may be suggested as a means to improve scores for full-time admission.

There are several concerns surrounding the significance of such test preparation courses, namely "deceptively large gains in scores" due to "inappropriate forms of test preparation", which could lead to an exaggeration in actual improvement (Koretz, 2005).

As well, there are many questions which are still to be investigated in relation to the myriad of outside factors that may contribute to English language learners' test scores. Examples of such factors (which have been central to several researchers' interests) include participation in study-abroad programs, learner's beliefs, test-taking repetition, pedagogical strategies of teachers, students' independent study strategies, students' living environments, gender, nationality, and so on (Adler, Ling, & Powers, 2014). In light of these concerns, a deeper understanding of the relationship between obtained test scores and actual English language proficiency is vital, not only for students but also for teachers, administrators, and educational stakeholders.

### **Year Three – Survey and Interviews**

Year Three of the study explores the relationship between obtained test scores and students' actual English language proficiency within the context of students' academic studies. Two groups of international and immigrant university students participated in this phase, sampled from undergraduate and graduate students at one Canadian and one Australian university.

In Canada, a questionnaire on ESL students' experience of English language learning, test preparation, and university academic performance was piloted and was finalized along with the Australian questionnaire. The final survey was administered in 2014 on SurveyMonkey to collect and track participants' demographic data, their obtained admission scores (IELTS or TOEFL), their test preparation experiences, and their academic achievement such as credits earned and GPAs. In order to fully understand the linguistic and academic demands in English in these universities, samples of learning and assessment tasks along with students' academic writing performances were collected. Currently, a sample of 155 questionnaires has been collected in Halifax, and data analysis is in progress.

Furthermore, a focus group discussion of five to eight ESL students will be conducted with a sampled number of test-taker groups. This allows for insights into the oracy and literacy demands of their university studies, and the extent to which their scores reflected their actual ability to cope with the linguistic demands of studying in English-speaking universities. Data from the questionnaire and focus groups will be analyzed thematically to understand the relationship between test-takers' obtained test scores and their English proficiency in their actual study content.

**Acknowledgement:** The funding for this study is from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grant.

### **References**

- Adler, R, Ling, G., & Powers, D. (2014). Do TOEFL iBT® scores reflect improvement in English-language proficiency? Extending the TOEFL iBT validity argument. *ETS Research Report Series, 1*, 1-16.
- Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2014). *Canada's universities in the world: AUCC internationalization survey*. Retrieved on January 20, 2015, from: <http://www.aucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/internationalization-survey-2014.pdf>
- Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (2014). *Canada's international education strategy: Harnessing our knowledge advantage to drive innovation and prosperity*. Retrieved on January 20, 2015, from: <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/assets/pdfs/overview-apercu-eng.pdf>
- Koretz, D. (2005). Alignment, high stakes, and the inflation of test scores. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, 104*, 99-118. Doi:10.1111/j.1744-7984.2005.00027.x

For more information please contact:

**Principal Investigator**

Liyong Cheng

[liying.cheng@queensu.ca](mailto:liying.cheng@queensu.ca)

Assessment and Evaluation Group  
Faculty of Education  
Duncan McArthur Hall  
511 Union Street  
Queen's University  
Kingston, ON  
Canada K7M 5R7