Determining the Language Assessment Literacy of Admissions Decision-Makers in Higher Education
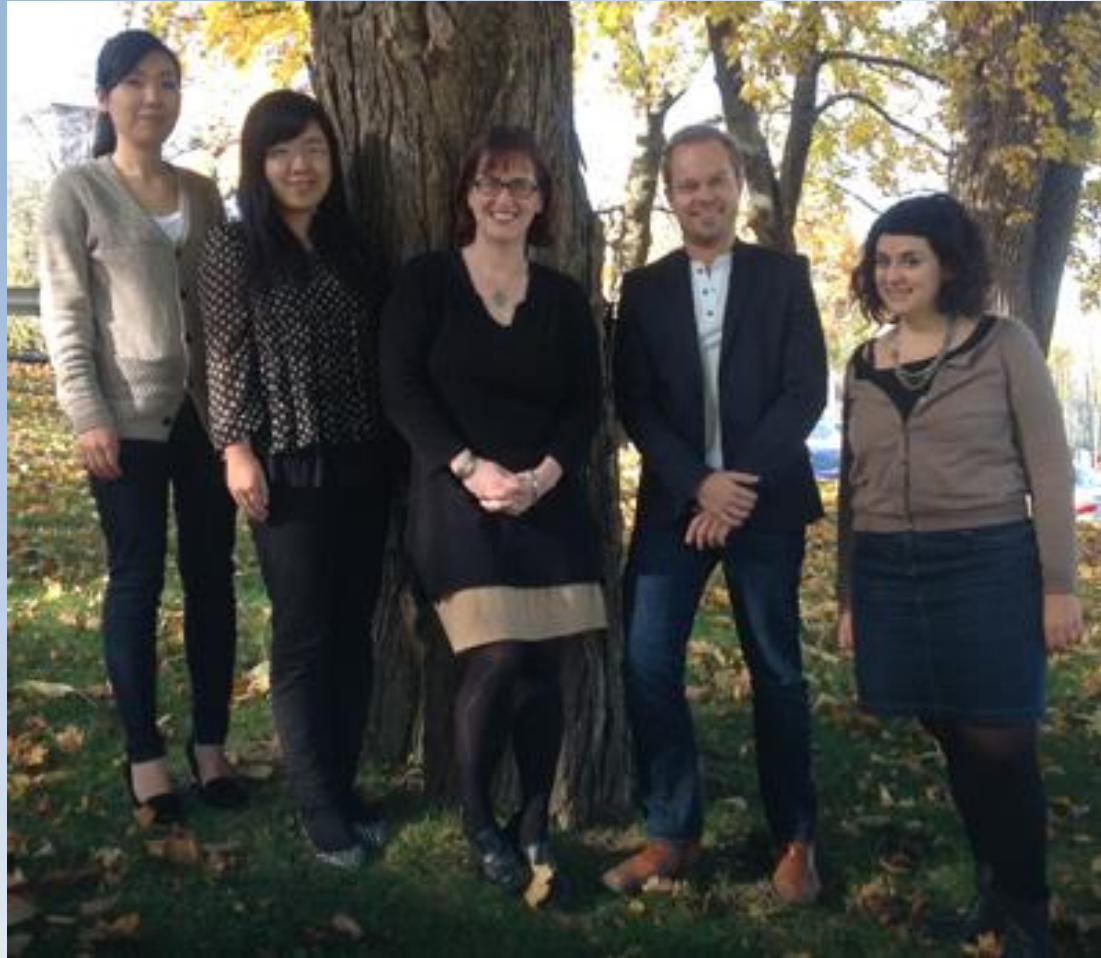
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LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT LITERACY
RESEARCH PROJECT

**ALTE Paris
April 10, 2014**

Presentation Overview

- Overview of the LAL project
- Our research questions and method
- Results of Phase 1
- Details of Phase 2 (completed) and Phase 3 (in progress)
- Questions (in English ou en français)

The LAL Project Team: Rika Tsushima, Shujiao Wang, Beverly Baker (PI), Mariusz Galczynski, Sarah DesRoches

OBJECTIVES OF THE LAL PROJECT

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE:

To bridge the gap between language assessment specialists/researchers/developers and the people who make use of language test scores

More specifically, to cultivate greater collaboration with admissions decision-makers at higher education institutions

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT LITERACY (LAL)

- Described by Taylor (2009) as "the level of knowledge, skills, and understanding of assessment principles and practice that is increasingly required by other test stakeholder groups…(e.g., among educational advisors or government officials, policy planners and decision makers, the media, and the general public)" (p. 24).

- Fulcher (2012): a definition of LAL that includes skills, knowledge and abilities but also an awareness of "the role and impact of testing on society, institutions and individuals" (p. 125).

LAL IN UNIVERSITY DECISION-MAKING

- O'Loughlin (IELTS; 2011, 2013): University stakeholders need to build their LAL

- Ginther & Elder—TOEFL, IELTS, & PTE (2013): Admissions officers report concerns regarding their limited knowledge about the use and interpretation of these tests

- Rea-Dickins, Kiely & Yu (IELTS; 2007): university admissions staff not always sufficiently knowledgeable about meaning of IELTS test scores

- Hyatt & Brooks (2009) reported a lack of knowledge among admissions stakeholders

OBJECTIVES OF THE LAL PROJECT

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1) What is the LAL needed for users of language test scores in admissions decision-making at postsecondary institutions in Canada?

2) What useful materials can be created to develop this LAL for these score users?

Steps in the LAL Project

Phase1 — survey of admissions officers—development, piloting, delivery, analysis
(Spring 2012-Winter 2013)

Phase 2 — Workshop material creation; workshop delivery; collection of feedback on usefulness
(Winter-Fall 2013)

Phase 3 (in progress) — Analysis of workshop transcripts and feedback; resource materials creation
(present)

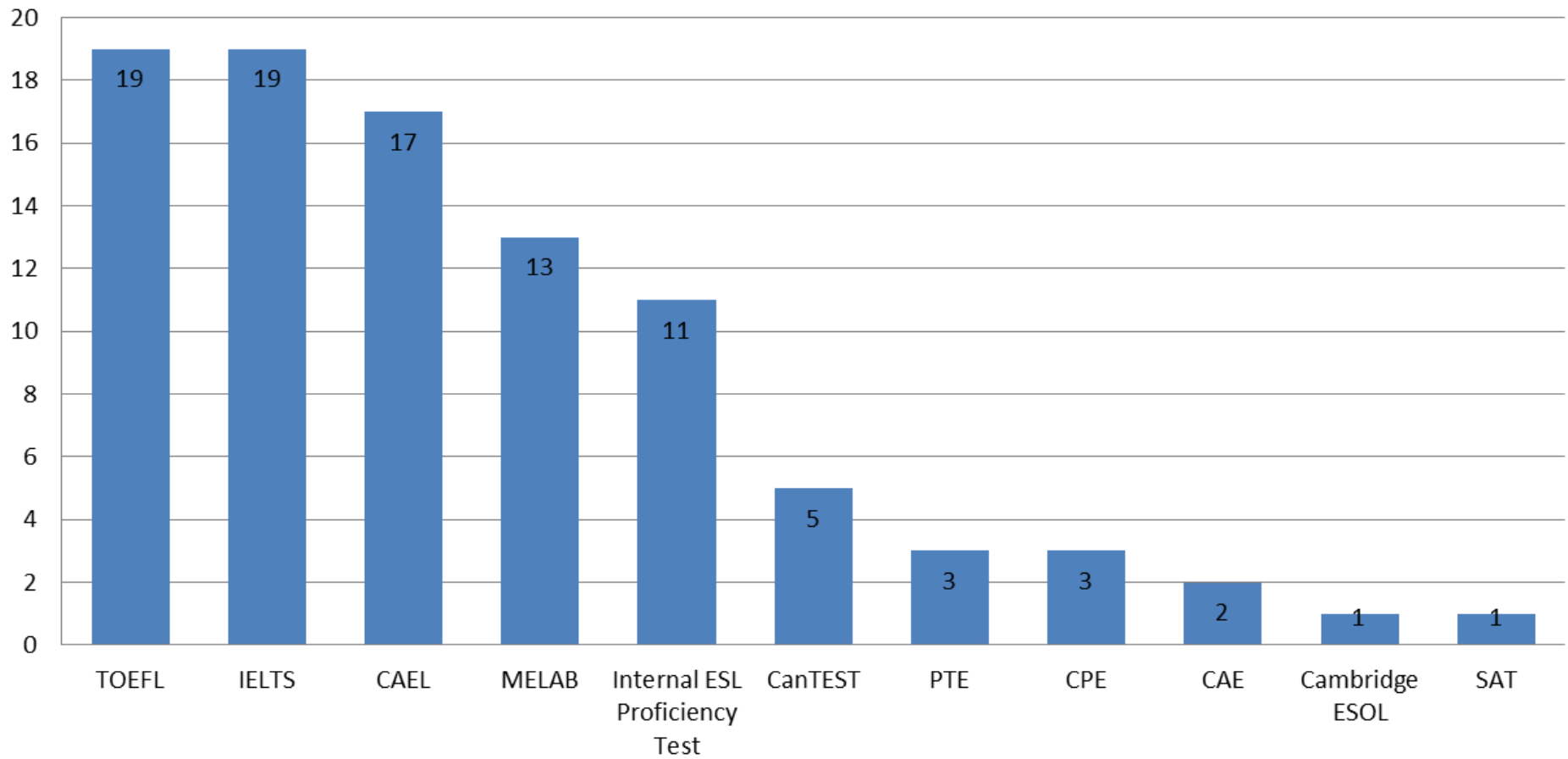# PROJECT PHASE 1: SURVEY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Method:

- Survey Adapted from O'Loughlin (see handout)

- Questions focused on knowledge, beliefs, and levels of confidence in making use of language test scores in decision-making

- Survey questions extensively reviewed/revised using a "systematic instrument appraisal list" (Fowler and Cosenza 2009)

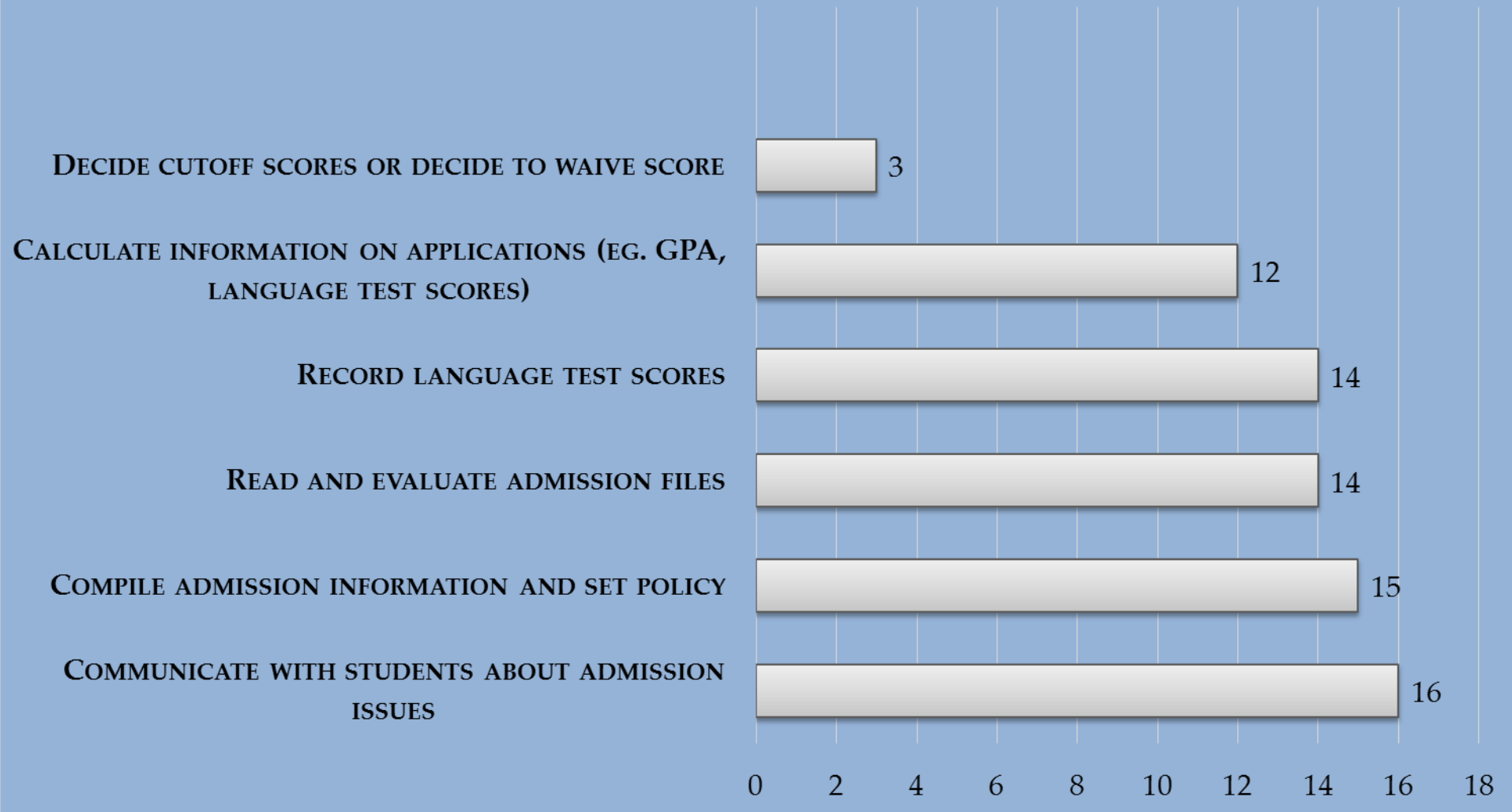- Survey administered online to initial contact list (53 institutions)

Results: Closed-Ended Questions

- N=19 (36% of initial contact list); from 8 provinces in all regions of Canada

- Representation from smaller primarily undergraduate institutions (>10,000 undergraduate students) and larger research-intensive universities (<20,000 undergraduate students).

Survey respondents' tasks in the admissions process

Task	Count
Decide cutoff scores or decide to waive score	3
Calculate information on applications (eg. GPA, language test scores)	12
Record language test scores	14
Read and evaluate admission files	14
Compile admission information and set policy	15
Communicate with students about admission issues	16

Who should have a good understanding of admissions language tests?

Personnel in ESL program	2
Admissions committee	2
University academic faculty	3
Recruitment personnel	5
Admissions--support staff	5
Admissions and faculty-level student advisors	5
Admissions--senior	14

0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16

Theme 1: *The construct of measurement*

P19: "[Language tests] may not be the only factor on a student's success but they do allow for a minimum benchmark to be established on the expectations of English preparedness."

- Evidence of some misconceptions:

P6: "[I would want to know] how many times a student had taken the same test."

RESULTS—QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS

Theme 2: *predictive validity*

- P3: "Language tests are useful in determining whether the student will be able to participate fully in class discussions and class work."

- P9: "The university's language requirements have been a good indicator of a student's undergraduate success..."

Theme 3: *The university's role in continued student language development*

P6: "We as university's [sic] need to do a better job of assisting ESL students once on campus to ensure they have resources for success."

Theme 4: *Concerns/requests for more information*

- How do all the different tests compare? Do they all measure the same thing?

- What is the relationship between test scores and success at university?

- How concerned should I be about test fraud?

Discussion

- Respondents demonstrate awareness of concepts related to validity in language assessment

- Previous literature found LAL lacking in these stakeholders, but not whether these stakeholders see the value of LAL or are interested in developing it.

- Therefore, it is an important finding that these participants have a strong interest in developing their own LAL.

Future Work

Test Fraud:

P11: "I am becoming more and more skeptical of high scores and believe there is a lot of fraud….What measures are in place for fraud prevention?"

P12: "For all tests I have concerns about security so would be useful to know more about that."

PHASE 2: WORKSHOPS

Materials designed to respond to common concerns and observed misconceptions, using research, test providers, and fellow admissions officers as sources. Key questions addressed:

1) How do all the different tests compare? Do they all measure the same thing?

2) What is the relationship between test scores and success at university?

3) How concerned should I be about test fraud?

Phase 3 (In Progress)

- Analysis of workshop transcripts to compare with themes emerging from the surveys

- Creation of informational materials to be distributed across the country

# THANK YOU!

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QUESTION 1: HOW DO THE MAJOR TESTS COMPARE?

TEST	TOEFL	IELTS	CAEL	MELAB	CanTEST
WHAT IT MEASURES	Ability to use and understand English at the university level, as well as skills to perform academic tasks	*Academic Module:* Formal language skills required for academic purposes *General Training:* Basic language survival skills	Ability to use English as it is used in Canadian universities and colleges	General assessment of English language proficiency	Ability to meet admission requirements of Canadian postsecondary institutions or fluency requirements of professional licensing associations
SKILLS TESTED	R, L, W S *(iBT only)*	R, L, W, S	R, L, W, S	R, L, W, S *(optional)*	R, L, W S *(extra fee)*
SCORING	0-120 total score, 0-30 subsections	1-9 band level	10-90 band level	33-99 total score	1-5 band level
LOCATIONS	+165 countries ≈ 4500 test sites	+130 countries ≈ 800 test sites	6 countries ≈ 35 test sites	+50 countries ≈ 300 test sites	Canada *(major cities only)*
DURATION	4.5 hours	3 hours*	2 hours	3 hours	3.5 hours
FEES	$250	$300	$185	$300	$150 ($250 *w/Speaking*)
SCORE REPORTING	Mail, Online	Mail, Online	Mail	Mail	Mail

* IELTS speaking test may be taken on same day or ± 7 days.

QUESTION 2: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE TEST SCORES AND SUCCESS AT UNIVERSITY?
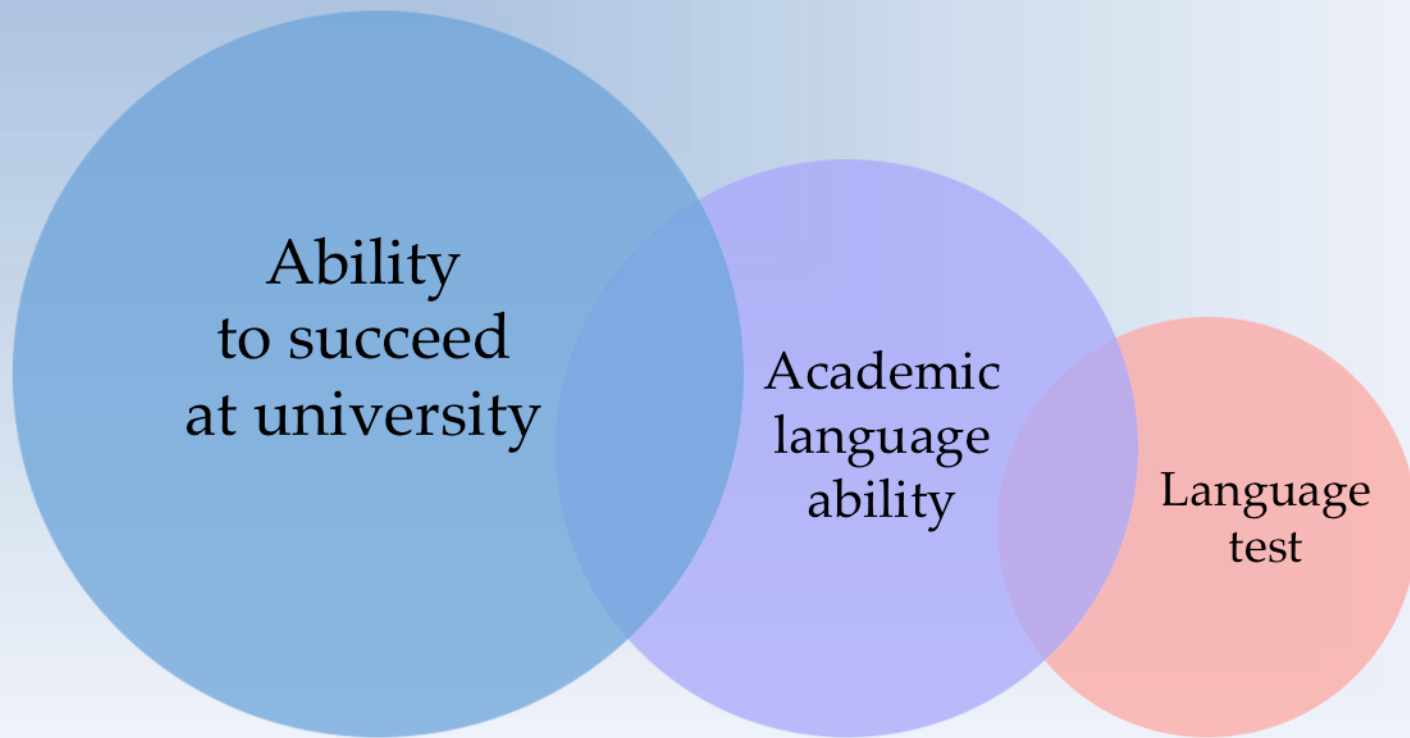
QUESTION 2: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE TEST SCORES AND SUCCESS AT UNIVERSITY?

Participants provided with the following:

- **Information from test providers about the construct of measurement;**

- **Research on predictive relationship between language test scores and university success or correlations with academic performance indicators (criterion-related validity studies)**

QUESTION 3: SHOULD I BE CONCERNED ABOUT TEST FRAUD?

- **Discussion of what fraudulent acts may include**

- **How test agencies prevent fraud**

- **Advice on actions when fraud is suspected**

Range of cutoff scores accepted across Canada

TEST	CUTOFF SCORES (UNDERGRAD)		CUTOFF SCORES (GRAD)	
	low	*high*	*low*	*high*
IELTS	6	7	6	7
TOEFL iBT	80	100	80	100
Reading	17	22		
Listening	14	22		
Writing	17	27		
Speaking	17	25		
CAEL	60	70	60	70
MELAB*	80	90	85	90

* Overall score does not include the optional speaking test

ARE THERE CLEAR GUIDELINES ON APPROPRIATE CUTOFF SCORES?

According to test providers: IELTS

BAND SCORE	LINGUISTICALLY DEMANDING ACADEMIC COURSES *e.g. Medicine, Law, Linguistics, Journalism, Library Studies*	LINGUISTICALLY LESS DEMANDING ACADEMIC COURSES *e.g. Pure Mathematics, Agriculture, Technology. Computer-based work, Telecommunications*	LINGUISTICALLY DEMANDING TRAINING COURSES *e.g. Air Traffic Control, Pure/Applied Sciences, Industrial Safety, Engineering*	LINGUISTICALLY LESS DEMANDING TRAINING COURSES *e.g. Animal Husbandry, Catering, Fire Services*
9.0 - 7.5	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
7.0	Probably acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
6.5	English study needed	Probably acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
6.0	English study needed	English study needed	Probably acceptable	Acceptable
5.5	English study needed	English study needed	English study needed	Probably acceptable

IELTS Guidance on Acceptable Language Proficiency Levels for Different Academic Courses (IELTS, 2012)

Who makes decisions on cutoff scores

- International Admissions 10%
- Director of Student Services 5%
- Provost 5%
- Academic Committee 5%
- ESL program Director 5%
- Admissions Cmte/Director/Registrar 45%
- Senate upon recommendation of Registrar 25%