

Sitting at 6.5: Problematizing IELTS and Admissions to Canadian Universities

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The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) standardized English language proficiency (ELP) exam is widely accepted proof of ELP at Canadian universities. The majority of Canadian universities set very similar IELTS cut scores for admission; however, these differ from the IELTS-recommended minimum cut scores. The use of the IELTS exam as an admission tool is not unproblematic, with debates around where to set cut scores, the interplay of political and administrative concerns in setting admissions criteria, and the correlation between cut scores and student academic success. As well, the issue of essential academic skills and literacies and their relationship to the exam, curricula, and student academic success figures in the broader discussion around the IELTS exam and its use in Canadian higher education.

L'évaluation standardisée des compétences linguistiques en anglais (ELP) du Système international de tests de la langue anglaise (IELTS) est largement reconnue comme preuve de compétence en anglais dans les universités canadiennes. La majorité d'entre elles établissent des notes de passage IELTS très semblables pour l'admission, mais celles-ci diffèrent des notes de passage minimales recommandées par l'IELTS. L'utilisation de l'examen IELTS comme outil d'admission n'est pas sans problèmes en raison des débats dont font l'objet la hauteur des notes de passage, l'interaction des préoccupations politiques et administratives qui entrent en jeu lors de l'établissement des critères d'admission, et la corrélation qui existe entre les notes de passage et la réussite académique des étudiantes et étudiants. La question des compétences et littératies académiques essentielles et de leur relation avec les examens, les programmes d'études et la réussite académique des étudiantes et étudiants entre elle aussi en ligne de compte dans le débat plus large qui porte sur l'examen IELTS et son utilisation dans l'enseignement supérieur au Canada.

KEYWORDS: higher education, IELTS, admissions, academic literacies, language policy

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in Canadian University Language Policy

Despite the lack of language policy at many Anglophone Canadian universities (MacDonald, forthcoming), universities seem to have well-defined admissions policies. In addition to defining academic requirements for ad-

mission, most institutions also specify English language proficiency (ELP) requirements and how applicants can demonstrate that their ELP is at a level the university deems suitable for academic work. Admission policies at many universities usually first define which applicants are required to prove ELP as those who have not attended a minimum number of years at an English-medium high school. Then, many policies identify the variety of methods each university accepts as proof of ELP, such as minimum scores on a variety of standardized language tests, or diplomas from partner institutions' pathway or bridging English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs.

Of the most widely used standardized tests, the IELTS, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) test, the Cambridge C1 Advanced are among the tests commonly seen across Canadian universities' admission policies. However, the IELTS exam has risen in popularity in recent years to become the "preferred" high-stakes English language test in Canada (IELTS, n.d.). The use of the IELTS exam for admissions purposes in Canada is not unproblematic: There have been debates around questions of its predictive validity for academic success (Lahib, 2016), problems associated with a lack of assessment literacy around the IELTS exam on behalf of institutions (Baker, 2016), and the setting of IELTS cut scores or admissions standards (Golder, Reeder, & Fleming, 2009). There have also been incidents of suspected testing fraud in Canada (Keung, 2018). However, no research into the motivating factors for admission standards-setting around language in Canadian higher education has been published to this date; internal research may exist, but internal institutional research is not always published or disseminated.

Given these debates and the growing role for IELTS as a high-stakes gatekeeping test, the exam raises questions, conflict, and political tensions at many Canadian universities. The objective of this *Perspectives* article is to highlight these tensions, debates, and concerns, both administrative and political, that surround the use of IELTS as an admissions tool. Drawing on the results of a survey of published IELTS admissions requirements across Canada and an examination of the IELTS *Guide for Educational Institutions, Governments, Professional Bodies and Commercial Organisations* (2014), in this *Perspectives* article, I explore some of these issues, especially those surrounding where to set IELTS cut scores and the challenges for teachers, administrators, and researchers who are involved in decision- and policy-making at their institutions concerning assessment and evaluation of student language skills, development of academic literacy, and articulation of academic success criteria.

IELTS 6.5: The Canadian University Admission Standard

The IELTS exam is offered in two formats: General Training, used for immigration and professional purposes, and Academic, which is used for higher

education. The Academic exam comprises a measure of four skills, consisting of a written exam of approximately 3 hr that can be completed with pen and paper or on a computer, along with an interview. The listening excerpts on the exam are in standard British, Australian, New Zealand, or North American Englishes. It is marked on a 9-point scale, providing examinees with reading, writing, listening, and speaking subscores, as well as an overall band score. Universities tend to set cut scores both for the overall IELTS score, as well as the individual band scores.

Where on the 9-Point Scale Do Canadian Institutions Set Their Cut Scores?

To examine Canadian universities' IELTS cut scores for undergraduate admissions, a survey of 35 English-medium Canadian universities' undergraduate admission websites was carried out in March 2019. The 35 universities chosen consisted of the 15 members of the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities, as well as the top 10 comprehensive universities, and the top 10 primarily undergraduate universities, according to the *Maclean's* magazine 2018 rankings (Maclean's, 2017; Maclean's, 2017a; Maclean's, 2017b). I accessed the page or section of the admissions website detailing the standardized tests accepted as proof of ELP. Table 1 below shows the required IELTS scores for admissions to the majority of undergraduate programs that can be entered directly from high school: education and nursing programs have been excluded from this list as they often require previous undergraduate study or have strict future linguistic criteria for licensure. For admission to an undergraduate degree at 34 of the 35 institutions surveyed, institutions require an IELTS band score of 6.5 overall for full acceptance. Some universities require certain minimum subject band scores, ranging from no minimum to 6.0 in one or all bands, to a 6.5 required in all bands.

Table 1

IELTS Exam Cut Scores for Undergraduate Admission at 35 Canadian Universities

University	Requirement	Minimums	Notes
Acadia	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Alberta	6.5	nothing below 5.5	
Calgary	6.5	—	
Carleton	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Concordia	7.0	—	Students can be admitted with 6.0-6.5 overall with no score below 5.5 but ESL courses required (credit)
Dalhousie	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Guelph	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Lakehead	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Lethbridge	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Manitoba	6.5	—	
McGill	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
McMaster	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Memorial	6.5	6.0 in Reading and Writing	
Mount Allison	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
New Brunswick	6.5	—	Exceptions: Arts and Health Sciences requirements are “higher”
Ottawa	6.5	6.5 in Writing	
Queen’s	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Saint Mary’s	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Saskatchewan	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Simon Fraser	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
St. Francis Xavier	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Toronto	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Trent	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
UBC	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
UNBC	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
UOIT	6.5	—	
UPEI	6.5	6.5 in Writing; nothing below 6.0	

University	Requirement	Minimums	Notes
Victoria	6.5	nothing below 6.0	Exceptions: Mathematics: 7.0 overall with nothing below 6.0
Waterloo	6.5	6.5 Writing, 6.5 Speaking, 6.0 Reading, 6.0 Listening	
Western	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
Wilfrid Laurier	6.5	nothing below 6.0	
York	6.5	—	Exceptions: School of Business: 7.5 overall; Engineering: 6.5 with nothing below 6.0

Note. ESL = English as a second language; UBC = University of British Columbia; UNBC = University of Northern British Columbia; UOIT = University of Ontario Institute of Technology; UPEI = University of Prince Edward Island.

Three universities named specific undergraduate programs (apart from nursing and education) that required an IELTS score of higher than 6.5 for admission. What is striking when looking at Table 1 is that virtually all universities require an IELTS band score of 6.5 overall. There is some variation in minimum band scores, but otherwise, it is quite a uniform requirement across the country.

IELTS's Band Score Recommendations for Admissions Purposes

Interestingly, the widespread Canadian requirement of 6.5 overall does not exactly align with what IELTS recommends. IELTS's *Guide* (2014) presents recommendations of minimum scores for admissions purposes for both training programs (likely, in the Canadian context, to be Applied, Vocational, or College diploma programs) and academic programs (such as university degree programs). A figure in the guide titled "Acceptability of IELTS Band Scores for Academic Courses" (p. 13) shows the band scores for admission to linguistically demanding and linguistically less demanding academic courses, and the probable acceptability of applicants' ELP at each band score level.

IELTS makes the distinction between "linguistically-demanding academic courses" and "less linguistically-demanding academic courses," although the guide gives no indication of how those two categories are defined. "Linguistically less-demanding" courses might refer to those in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, where nonlinguistic skills such as mathematics have traditionally held a central focus. However, this distinction might arguably be growing less clear as many traditionally less linguistically-

tically demanding programs such as engineering now involve internships, work terms or other forms of experiential learning such as co-op. These types of experiential learning programs involve many linguistically demanding tasks during the job search phase (résumé and cover letter writing, interviewing, etc.), as well as in the workplace (e-mail and report writing, meetings, presentations, interpersonal oral communication, etc.). IELTS qualifies the information in the “Acceptability of IELTS Band Scores for Academic Courses” figure, acknowledging the limitations of a standardized test, and variability between institutions and programs, specifying that “each individual institution should set its own minimum IELTS score for applicants, depending on specific institutional and programme requirements,” and also that “many diverse variables can affect performance on courses, of which language ability is but one” (p. 13).

Regardless of this acknowledgement of limitations, it is clear from the guide that the widespread Canadian standard cut score for undergraduate admission of a 6.5 overall band score is only “probably acceptable” to some undergraduates in terms of their readiness to perform acceptably at university. In linguistically demanding courses, students with a 6.5 overall “probably still need English study,” those with a 7.0 are “probably acceptable”; only those with a 7.5+ are deemed “acceptable.” For less linguistically demanding courses, a 6.5 is “probably acceptable,” with a 7.0 and up “acceptable.”

Is 6.5 Sufficient?

There is a discrepancy between the official IELTS guidelines in IELTS (2014) and the undergraduate admissions cut score of 6.5 in place at many Canadian universities. IELTS predicts most students in linguistically demanding courses who have achieved an overall IELTS score of 6.5 will probably need further English study at that level. Even for less linguistically demanding courses, the ELP of those students who have achieved an IELTS score of 6.5 overall is only “probably acceptable.” Based on these criteria, an IELTS score of 6.5 overall does not seem to be an adequately high score for most students to achieve academic success in an undergraduate university program. Another discrepancy between the information in the IELTS *Guide* and the admission criteria of the 35 universities surveyed is that while IELTS defines different standards for academic programs of differing levels of linguistic demand, this division by discipline is not systematically reflected in universities’ admissions policies for the majority of undergraduate programs entered directly from high school. Some universities did, indeed, require higher cut scores for linguistically demanding programs that require previous undergraduate study or have strict future licensure criteria, such as education and nursing. However, there was no systematic difference in cut scores between most undergraduate programs, for example, a bachelor of engineering and bachelor of arts and humanities.

There are several factors that could influence the discrepancy between the official guidelines, as described in IELTS (2014), and the undergraduate admissions cut score of 6.5 in place at many Canadian universities. Baker (2016), in a study of admissions and recruitment staff at Canadian universities, found a lack of assessment literacy in terms of the commonly used standardized exams, such as IELTS. Therefore, those admission stakeholders might be unaware of what an IELTS band score of 6.5 really means in terms of a student's real-life language proficiency, despite the fact that IELTS and the other standardized testing agencies usually provide user guides (see, for instance, IELTS, 2014) to provide recommendations on the application of their test scores by institutions.

Another explanation for the discrepancy between IELTS (2014) and the cut score of 6.5 common in Canadian university admissions could be the influence of market conformity and economic pressures influencing the standards-setting process. Murray (2015), in a study of English language standards in U.K. higher education, reported that issues of competitiveness for international student enrolments and maintenance of market share led to institutions feeling pressure to set language requirements lower than the recommended level. In Golder et al. (2009), the authors report political and administrative, rather than substantive, reasoning behind the setting of IELTS writing and speaking band cut scores for admissions at a Canadian postsecondary polytechnic institute: for example, to facilitate greater enrolment or because of pressure to align with cut scores of similar institutions for recruitment purposes. Could it be that in the competitive marketing environment of Canadian higher education (HE), where universities are competing against each other to recruit international students, no one wants to raise their admission standard higher than the rest for fear of losing out on recruits? As mentioned earlier, no research into the motivating factors for admission standards-setting around language in Canadian HE has been published. Nonetheless, it is a troubling thought that cut scores at some Canadian universities might be influenced by competition or the educational marketplace, rather than informed guidelines published by the testing agencies, or criteria related to students' abilities to achieve academic success.

IELTS and the “English Language Problem”

This discrepancy between IELTS-recommended minimum cut scores and the admission standard at most universities alone is not necessarily problematic. However, academic literature (Guo & Guo, 2017; Anderson, 2015; Murray, 2015; Fox et al., 2014; Cheng & Fox, 2008), mass media (Basen, 2016), and anecdotal evidence from my own practice have all identified issues in Canadian HE related to students' ELP and abilities. Murray (2015) identifies what he refers to as the “English language problem,” as “systemic” (p. 35) at many Anglophone universities. Internationalization of the institution has

brought about changes in the linguistic and cultural diversity in the student population. Students of diverse linguistic backgrounds may struggle with curricular demands, while faculty and staff report feeling underequipped to support those students' language and academic literacy development. This linguistic and literacy development is necessary not just for students to be able to complete coursework, but also for them to be able to complete internships and work placements, as well as to secure employment upon graduation (Murray, 2015). Indeed, Anderson (2015) relays various Canadian studies that report students "struggling with academic reading and writing tasks due to the heavy demands of university coursework, frustrations with receiving insufficient or confusing feedback from instructors, and oral fluency challenges during presentations and class discussions" (p. 179). Other Canadian researchers, including Guo and Guo (2017), Fox et al. (2014), and Cheng and Fox (2008) have discussed this issue of ELP and its interplay with the student experience and academic success in Canada. Mass media outlets have also weighed in on the issue of international students and language proficiency (Basen, 2016), linking this issue to the frustration of domestic and international students alike, as well as that of faculty and staff.

Looking Beyond 6.5?

If the "English language problem" is, indeed, present in Canadian HE, as described above, then raising admissions cut scores on standardized ELP assessments could be one avenue to address the language and literacy challenges faced by university students from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Golder et al., 2009; Murray, 2015). If Canadian institutions raised their IELTS cut scores to a 7.0 or 7.5 overall to match IELTS's own recommendations, it might address the "English language problem" and also resolve the discrepancy between universities' admissions criteria and IELTS's guidelines. However, such a change could also prove problematic.

Simply raising IELTS scores for admissions purposes would not necessarily solve the "English language problem," as higher scores would not necessarily improve the academic literacies or academic socialization gap at admission; namely, the gap between what students come out of high school knowing and what they need to know in their first year of university in terms of how to "do" university, such as the conventions and expectations of meaning-making within the academy and the disciplines. Academic literacies involve "the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each [set of practices] evokes" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 159). Importantly, the IELTS standardized ELP assessment is a language proficiency exam, and, therefore, does not test for these academic and disciplinary literacies (Pilcher & Richards, 2017). In contrast, other routes to satisfying ELP requirements for admission, such as

pathway or bridging EAP programs in Canada, the successful completion of which is accepted as meeting the university's minimum ELP assessment criteria, do tend to include topics such as academic skills and literacies (Fox et al., 2014). Academic literacies are needed and affect all students, including international students and/or those who use English as an additional language (EAL), as well as those who fall between the lines of the traditional domestic/international, or native-English-speaking/EAL binaries, such as those who immigrated as children or teens, generation 1.5, first-generation university attendees. Canadian studies such as Marshall (2009) and Marshall et al. (2012) have shown the importance of academic literacies for all first-year university students. Providing support for language and literacy development for all students both pre-admission and throughout the course of their undergraduate degrees is essential (Murray, 2015). Addressing language and academic literacy in the curriculum is quite a separate issue from that of cut scores for admissions, and raising cut scores would not remove the need to account for and support development of these academic skills in university curriculum over the course of students' degree programs.

In addition, given the difficulty of obtaining a score of 7.0 or 7.5 on the IELTS and the national patterns in IELTS achievement, raising IELTS cut scores for admissions might have a gatekeeping effect at odds with the patterns of international student enrolment in Canada. A score of 7.0 or 7.5, corresponding roughly to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) C1 (IELTS USA, n.d.), is not an easy score to obtain; in fact, the average scores on the IELTS exam are far below 7.0 or 7.5 in most cases. In 2017, of those who wrote the IELTS academic exam for the purposes of completing an HE course, 6% received a 7.5 overall and 10% a 7.0, while 16% and 23% received a 6.5 or 6.0, respectively (IELTS, 2019). According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (2019), in 2017-2018, the top source countries for inbound international students in Canada were China (28%), India (25%), South Korea (5%), France (4%), Brazil, Nigeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Japan (2% each). The average IELTS scores in 2017 from testing centres in those countries are mostly well below 7.0: 5.76 (China), 6.04 (India), 6.65 (Brazil), 6.71 (France), 6.12 (Brazil), 6.79 (Nigeria), 5.81 (Japan), and 5.26 (Saudi Arabia). A variety of factors might influence this variation: Those who have critically examined the IELTS test have found issues of cultural bias (Khan, 2006; Freimuth, 2016), economic factors (Hamid, 2016), and linguistic factors (Uysal, 2010), and other phenomena that might account for these national patterns in test performance. The statistics above are general national statistics, and also IELTS is but one path into Canadian universities. Nonetheless, raising IELTS scores for admission would most likely affect students from certain countries more than others, perhaps keeping out "for the wrong reasons" those students who are poor test-takers but could, in reality, be able to cope with the linguistic demands of an undergraduate degree (Golder et al., 2009, p. 6).

In summary, in this *Perspectives* article, I have demonstrated that many Canadian universities' IELTS cut scores for admissions do not align with those in IELTS's *Guide* (2014). This is surprising in light of the "English language problem" and the ELP-related challenges being faced by some students in Canadian HE. However, although raising required IELTS cut scores for admission across the country might seem like a simple solution, admission cut scores must be considered in light of a host of factors. An important fact is that IELTS is a language proficiency exam that does not account for academic literacies. Moreover, the political and administrative factors involved with setting cut scores should be taken into account, as well as the gatekeeping consequences that might arise should cut scores be raised above 6.5.

In addition to IELTS cut scores, an institutional approach to curricular and student-service structures to support all students' academic language and literacy development both pre- and postadmission is crucial. Murray (2015), Fenton-Smith and Humphreys (2015), and others report on different models of institutional response to academic literacy and language support and development in the United Kingdom and Australia. Among successful practices, these studies report a widely held mindset wherein academic language and literacy are not simply viewed as an issue at admission, but as the focus of ongoing development throughout a student's degree program. As well, curriculum-embedded and credit-bearing models with a focus on language education rather than support (Liddicoat & Crichton, 2008) seem to be effective. Finally, an acknowledgement that "academic language . . . is no one's mother tongue" (Bourdieu et al., 1994, p. 8) and that, therefore, academic language and literacy development should be a learning outcome for students of all linguistic backgrounds could have implications for all those who do language work in the academy. More research might be carried out in the context of Canadian HE to dig into these very important questions around admissions and academic language and literacy at Canadian colleges and universities to fill in the gaps in research, policy, and teaching and learning.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr. Gerry Russo for his comments on a draft of this article.

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