

Research Results

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ENGLISH PROFICIENCY REQUIREMENTS AT BC POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS: CHALLENGES POSED FOR STUDENTS

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Introduction

In 2008-09, the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) conducted an environmental scan to assess whether there was a perceived need and support for system-wide work on post-secondary admissions processes and practices for the benefit of students in British Columbia (BC). Both post-secondary staff, high school counsellors and related secondary staff were surveyed. One of the recommendations arising from the feedback received, particularly from secondary representatives, was that BCCAT should conduct a study to examine the current state of entry requirements to standard first year degree program English courses, which vary greatly across institutions. The study would determine the extent of any issues and suggest remedies, if needed.

In 2009-2010, BCCAT, under the auspices of its Admissions Committee, commissioned a comparative study of English proficiency requirements at BC's post-secondary institutions. An attempt was made to develop a comparative grid of English proficiency requirements for institutional admission and for entry into a first-year, transferable English course. English proficiency requirements include those designed to assess overall communication skills (typically asked of all applicants) and those designed to assess familiarity with the English language (typically asked of applicants for whom English is a second language). A set of tables was developed in order to understand the range and variety of English proficiency requirements and to determine the clarity of their presentation. When institutions did not have general English proficiency requirements for institutional

The purpose of this newsletter is to present the key observations emerging from this study and to make recommendations on possible future actions that could be taken to clarify English proficiency requirements for the benefit of students.

admission, the "institutional admission" requirement used was the English proficiency requirement for entry into a university transfer program or a Bachelor's degree in Arts and Sciences.

The sources of information for the comparative grid were institutional websites and electronic calendars. Because it can sometimes be difficult to interpret this information and to ascertain its currency, registrars plus English as a Second Language (ESL) and English department contacts at all institutions were sent a copy of their information as it had been transcribed and were asked to review and verify it. Over 40 percent of the institutions contacted replied with suggestions or corrections, and the findings were submitted to the BCCAT Admissions Committee in the Spring of 2010. At that time, it was decided that this newsletter should be prepared to present the key observations emerging from this study and to make recommendations on possible future actions that could be taken to clarify English proficiency requirements for the benefit of students.

It is understood that decisions on English language requirements rest entirely within the decision-making structures of autonomous institutions. Any recommendations made in this newsletter are made with full awareness of that autonomy while at the same time keeping the interests of students in mind.

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Student Success and English Proficiency Requirements

Students and the post-secondary institutions that serve them have a common interest in striving to ensure student success, and one of the keys to that success has long been recognized as the student’s ability to work in English at a post-secondary level.

English proficiency requirements are intended to confirm that students have sufficient preparation to succeed in their studies. In seeking to support student success through English proficiency requirements, it would seem beneficial to both domestic and international students and to the institutions which are recruiting them that the information about these requirements can be easily accessed, is clearly and simply presented and would have a reasonable consistency across institutions.

Types of English Proficiency Requirements

English proficiency requirements for both domestic and international students often exist on at least three levels at post-secondary institutions:

1. institutional admission,
2. program admission, and
3. course admission.

Issues Identified

ISSUE 1: General Presentation and Access to Information

A major difficulty in comparing English proficiency requirements was posed by the variety of places and ways institutions presented their proficiency requirements. It was not always easy to know where in the calendar or on the website to find English proficiency requirements.

English proficiency requirements for institutional admission, for program entry and for entry into a first-year transferable English course were not always clearly distinguished, and because of the way information was presented it was sometimes difficult to discover if there was, or was not, a difference among these standards.

If accessing the information on English proficiency requirements and comparing these requirements among institutions proved difficult for someone who has taught English and served as an administrator in the post-secondary system for thirty-five years, no doubt, it presents a considerable challenge for students.

Recommendations

It might facilitate students’ searches for English proficiency requirements if institutions considered adopting a convention for situating them in their institutional calendars or on websites. For instance, on websites, all English proficiency requirements could be presented as part of the overall institutional admission requirements with links to other locations where the requirements might appear.

It would also make the information easier for students to understand if each institution had a common way of presenting its English proficiency requirements, possibly in a grid format. For instance, a grid establishing equivalencies between the English 12 grade and various standardized test scores, as is offered in some calendars, would make the institutional requirements both clear and transparent.

Possible Grid Format for Presenting English Proficiency Requirements Comparatively						
English 12 Eng. Lit. 12 Eng. 12 F.P.	TOEFL Computer	TOEFL Paper	TOEFL Internet	IELTS	CAEL	LPI
C+	230 Essay 4.5 TSE 50	570 TWE 4.5 TSE 50	88 Spoken 40	6.0 Speaking 6.0 Listening 5.5 Reading 5.5 Writing 6.0	60 Speaking 60 Listening 60 Reading 60 Writing 60	Essay 5

NOTE: See page 3 for definitions of acronyms used.

A grid could also include reference to the outcomes for students if various standards are or are not met. For each measure of English performance, the grid could clarify the minimum standards for institutional admission, program admission and/or course admission.

The situation might also be clarified for students if English proficiency requirements were clearly linked to the different student/applicant audiences:

1. students educated in British Columbia;
2. students educated in other parts of Canada;
3. international students for whom English has been the primary language of education; and
4. international students for whom English has not been the primary language of education.

Information on English proficiency requirements might be easier to access and compare if institutions, in addition to stating the information clearly on their own sites, had a central place to present their English proficiency requirements, perhaps through the institutional interface provided by BCCAT's Education Planner website (www.educationplanner.ca).

ISSUE 2:

Ways to Satisfy English Proficiency Requirements

There are a wide variety of ways of meeting English proficiency requirements, and while this variety provides some advantages to students, it is often confusing and difficult to compare ways of satisfying the requirements within an institution and among different institutions.

For students educated in BC, the grade obtained in English 12, English Literature 12 or English First Peoples 12 is often used either as a standard for English proficiency or to determine which students must take institutionally developed or standardized tests to determine proficiency or placement.

For international students educated in English, success in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program is used by several institutions to determine proficiency.

For international students whose primary language of education has not been English, English proficiency is often determined through the use of standardized tests. The most commonly used tests are:

CAEL	Canadian Academic English Language Assessment
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
LPI	Language Proficiency Index
TOEFL C	Test of English as a Foreign Language - Computer-Based
TOEFL I	Test of English as a Foreign Language - Internet-Based
TOEFL P	Test of English as a Foreign Language - Paper-Based
• TSE	Test of Spoken English
• TWE	Test of Written English

In addition to these commonly used tests, there are an even larger number of less frequently used standardized tests.

For both domestic and international students, many institutions also provide ESL and Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses whose successful completion may be used to satisfy English proficiency requirements.

a. BC High School English Grades -- Observations and Recommendations

Nearly all institutions require a specific high school English 12 grade in order for a student to be exempted from taking a local placement test or to obtain direct entry into a first-year, transferable English course. However, the grade accepted varies widely from institution to institution. Some institutions do not specify a grade while others require all students to do a placement test. Grades required vary from successful completion of Grade 12 English to a grade of "A" in Grade 12 English.

Some institutions specifically recognize "English 12 First Peoples" as the equivalent of "English 12" and "English Literature 12." The fact that other institutions do not clarify whether they do or do not accept this equivalence leaves students unclear.

Institutions are not always explicit about what they mean by the English 12 grade. Some are clear stating that they are dealing with the school grade, or the provincial exam grade or the blended grade. Others do not define what is meant by an English 12 grade. Students should know what form of the grade is being used.

There might be a useful inter-institutional discussion about the reasons for the variation in what constitutes an English 12 grade.

Institutions often express their BC English 12 grades in different formats, sometimes as a percentage and sometimes as a letter grade, again making a comparison of requirements more difficult.

b. Institutionally Developed Placement Tests -- Observations and Recommendations

While standardized placement tests are often used, most institutions rely heavily on locally developed tests to determine students' entry into first-year, transferable English courses. In their publications very few institutions indicate the nature of such tests or the scores required on these tests as compared to the scores required on other standardized tests.

It might be helpful to students to specify the score required on institutional tests for admission or entry to a first-year, transferable English course as compared to the level required on standardized tests. Such information would allow students familiar with standardized tests to understand the level of proficiency that the institution is requiring. Knowing what score is required on an institutional test would also allow students to assess their progress if they had to take the institutional test on multiple occasions.

c. Standardized Tests – Observations and Recommendations

Since some standardized tests are quite commonly used across the system (LPI, TOEFL CAEL, IELTS), it might be useful if institutions which do not accept scores from these instruments explicitly state that decision. The fairly general acceptance of these tests can leave students with the expectation that these test scores will be considered in all institutions.

While different institutions are bound to have different requirements, agreed on equivalencies among the scores on different testing instruments would be useful. For example, TOEFL Paper 570 is seen as equal to CAEL 60 at one institution or CAEL 70 at another. The same TOEFL score may be equated to IELTS scores of 6.0 or 6.5 depending on the institution. TOEFL Paper 570 may also translate as the equivalent of a “C+” or a “B” in Grade 12 English depending on the institution.

The fact that institutions differ on their equivalencies between the high school grade and standardized test scores and also between equivalencies accorded test scores raises a credibility issue about the translation of grades and scores and is likely confusing to students.

Another issue for students trying to understand standardized test requirements is that the same component of the same test may be referred to differently by different institutions. For example, the same test component may be variously referred to as either the “writing,” “composition” or “essay” component. It would probably be clearer for students if institutions agreed to express their test requirements in a common manner or to use the descriptor provided on the test.

d. Currency Requirements – Observations and Recommendations

Some institutions require that grades or test scores have a certain currency, but this does not appear to be the practice at all institutions, nor is there consistency about what constitutes currency.

If grades or test scores are to be stale-dated, credibility for this practice might be increased if there were some inter-institutional agreement on the length of time that grades and scores will be considered valid.

Possible Next Steps

Since English proficiency requirements play an important role for institutions and students in their shared commitment to student success, it would seem imperative that these requirements are transparent, relatively consistent and efficacious.

1. BCCAT could identify those bodies which are best placed to address some of the above observations (e.g., the BC Registrars' Association, the ESL Articulation Committee and the English Articulation Committee) and circulate this paper to them. BCCAT could discuss the various issues involving English proficiency requirements with these groups and determine if there is any interest in inter-institutional work to address some of these issues.
2. It appears that most institutions rely heavily on their institutionally developed tests for determining English proficiency, but often little information is available to students about such tests. Because of the reliance on these tests, it might be useful to undertake a study looking at the development, content and application of such tests. Given the amount of effort that institutions put into developing, administering and scoring these tests, they have an obvious interest in verifying that their testing instruments are valid and are producing the desired results.
3. It might also be useful to do a study of how well current requirements predict or ensure student success in post-secondary studies and particularly in first-year English. It should be possible to compare student success in first-year transferable English courses with high school grades and scores on standardized tests. Such research could probably build on studies already done at some institutions.