

Preparation studies in Canada

English for academic purposes courses are an essential stepping stone towards entry into higher education institutions in Canada.

Over the past seven years, the enrolment on our English for academic purposes (EAP) course has increased over fivefold,' states David Parkinson, Director of the Centre for Second Language Instruction at the University of Saskatchewan. 'Our programme is unable to satisfy the demand in the global marketplace for this product.'

Worldwide, demand for academic preparation courses is growing and institutions providing these courses in Canada are noticing rising enrolments, particularly from Chinese students. 'Since early 2001, the largest percentage of students [at our English language centre] has been from the People's Republic of China,' says Maureen Sargent, Director of the TESL Centre at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. Rachel Wang, from Beijing Oz Enrolment Centre in China, also reports increased interest in EAP courses among her clients. 'Ninety per cent of our students would like to do an exam preparation and academic preparation course as they don't have a Toefl result [to apply to universities in Canada or the USA],' she says.

The Chinese student market has been particularly buoyant in all areas of education travel in recent years due to the easing of visa restrictions combined with massive student demand. However, Canada's visa policy is creating particularly high demand from Chinese students in the field of academic preparation. 'An offer of a language course [combined with a] conditional offer [from] a university is vital for success in applying for a visa,' underlines Wang.

Aside from the visa issue, Parkinson also points out that EAP courses are important for students from China and other Asian countries due to 'differing classroom cultures'. He explains, 'Many Asian students are not familiar with the concept of openly expressing personal opinion in an academic setting or challenging the position of the teacher or other students. They may also [misunderstand] the western concept of plagiarism versus quoting authorities without attribution.'

As academic preparation courses are generally a stepping stone for students with specific future education goals, some schools and universities in Canada have started to integrate their preparation courses with academic study. '[Students] are often frustrated with the need to take English courses prior to starting their credit study,' says Sargent. 'We now offer an option where higher level students can take one undergraduate course at the same time as they are completing their English studies.'



Viewpoints about the efficacy of EAP courses for international students

'I think [they are] very important. The students in an EAP course practise the functions required in an academic environment. These include questioning, explaining, describing, informing and arguing. Students engage in debates, participate in and lead

seminars, and read widely. They learn advanced vocabulary and they also carry out research and write a research paper.'

Hannah Friesen, English Language Centre, University of Manitoba

'[EAP] is a must for students planning to [study at] North American universities and colleges. Even Canadian students find it challenging, especially at the beginning. You can imagine what it [is like for] international students.'

Nasser Alikhani, Director ESL Programmes, Century College, Vancouver

'Academic preparation courses are extremely important for international students as they help individuals prepare for the new teaching and learning environment which may be quite different from what they are used to. We find that students benefit enormously from the process of learning how to write a Canadian research paper or how to do an oral presentation.'

Maureen Sargent, TESL Centre, Saint Mary's University, Halifax

'An [EAP] course is quite helpful in preparing students for culture shock, for understanding better the Canadian way of thinking, way of studying and research methods. Also, a preparation programme helps students gain an insight into what is expected of them.'

Rachel Wang, Beijing Oz Enrolment Centre, China

'There is an increasing emphasis on finishing the EAP preparation and getting on with academic studies,' adds Parkinson. 'Much of this can be attributed to the financial strain of studying abroad.'

Other Canadian language centres, whether attached to universities or independently operated, offer conditional university places upon successful completion of a course, which can be a major attraction for international students. 'We sell [our] EAP course as English plus university,' says Hannah Friesen at the English Language Centre at the University of Manitoba. 'We have created a direct entry programme at the University of Manitoba. Students are screened into this [EAP] programme and, upon successful completion, may enter the University of Manitoba directly.'

Friesen adds that students are encouraged to suggest changes and improvements to their courses which are evaluated each term. 'Changes that we have made include adding mini-courses such as textbook reading, which includes textbooks from real university courses,' she says. 'We have [also] added more university classroom visits and also more field trips in the community.'

Preparation courses can be crucial in building up student confidence, and international students may also find that universities in North America look more favourably on those who have completed an EAP course. 'We have agreements with universities and colleges in Canada and the USA,' says Lynn McVeigh from Canada Language Centre in Vancouver. 'These institutions prefer students who have taken EAP courses before entering post-secondary programmes.'