

## Jacqueline Ross TOEFL Dissertation Award 2013

The editors and publisher of *Papers in Language Testing and Assessment* congratulate the winner of the 2013 Jacqueline Ross TOEFL Dissertation Award: Dr Robert Charles Johnson.

Dr Johnson's dissertation is entitled *Assessing the assessments: Using an argument-based validity framework to assess the validity and use of an English placement system in a foreign language context* and was supervised by Dr Mehdi Riazi at Macquarie University where it was accepted in 2011.

The Jacqueline Ross TOEFL Dissertation Award, granted annually by the TOEFL Program at ETS, recognises a significant and original contribution by a doctoral dissertation to knowledge in the field of second or foreign language testing. Further information about the award can be found at [http://www.ets.org/toefl/grants/jacqueline\\_ross\\_dissertation\\_award](http://www.ets.org/toefl/grants/jacqueline_ross_dissertation_award).

This year's award was formally announced by ETS in February this year, and was presented to Dr Johnson at the Language Testing Research Colloquium 2013 in Seoul, Korea. An abstract of Dr Johnson's dissertation appears below. This is followed by an extract from the TOEFL Committee of Examiners' report on Dr Johnson's dissertation.

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**Assessing the assessments: Using an argument-based validity framework to assess the validity and use of an English placement system in a foreign language context**

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### **Abstract**

Use of a single, standardised instrument to make high-stakes decisions about test-takers is pervasive in higher education. Contrary to longstanding best practices encouraged by researchers, professional organizations, test publishers, and many accrediting bodies, however, few, if any, such institutions have endeavoured to meaningfully validate the instrument(s) they use for their specific context and purposes. The current

study attempted to address this void by developing and applying an argument-based validation framework for two widely adopted placement assessment methods – a standardised placement test (Accuplacer), and a locally developed and marked writing sample – utilised by a 2-year higher education institution in the Pacific.

A hybrid of two validation structures – Kane’s interpretive model and Bachman’s assessment use argument – was implemented in order to assure a balanced focus on both test score interpretation and test utilization. Various types and sources of evidence informed the study, including instrument outcomes, student course results, institutional practices and policies, test publisher data, and the opinions of stakeholders gathered via focus group interview and questionnaires.

Results are argued to provide insights regarding a number of current issues in the literature, including: i) debates regarding the relative strengths and weaknesses of standardised tests and locally developed and marked writing samples for informing placement decisions; ii) the value of locally conducted validation efforts to evaluate the performance and impact of an institution’s chosen assessment instruments, and identifying opportunities for improvement; and iii) the need for further argument-based validation studies, particularly those which attend to both test score interpretation and the long- neglected area of test utilization, to be carried out wherever assessments are used to make decisions which impact stakeholders.

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The following extract from the TOEFL Committee of Examiners’ report comments on the scholarly and professional significance of Dr Johnson’s dissertation. It is reproduced here with kind permission from the TOEFL Program at ETS.

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Robert Johnson’s dissertation is an ambitious undertaking that provides an interesting, detailed example of an application of an argument-based approach to validation of the placement procedures in use in the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI),

in its US-accredited, 2-year college program with a student population that is 98% English Language Learners. The CMI uses a combination of an external, standardized placement test (Accuplacer Companion) and a locally developed and marked writing task to place (and exempt) students within their Developmental English language program. In the college featured in this dissertation, as in most community colleges in the US, the process represents high stakes for students' academic trajectories, as it determines whether students have access to credit bearing courses. It is even more high stakes in the College of the Marshall Islands where a low score in the placement test could result in not being admitted.

Johnson constructed and investigated a validation framework which is a hybrid of Kane's interpretive model and Bachman's (2005) Assessment Use Argument approach, and which comprehensively attends equally to aspects of both score meaning and test use. This is an innovation in validity research and could well be used by other researchers in a variety of contexts. Johnson's study obviously sheds light on the problems in the CMI's placement system (which had not been studied before) and suggests several ways to improve the procedures. Approaches to placement similar to the one used in the CMI that combine standardized tests and local assessments are very common and, thus, the issues and recommendations discussed in the dissertation are likely to be of interest in many institutional contexts internationally.

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