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Investigating MUET: The Intended and Unintended Washback Effects on Malaysian Education

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) plays a significant role in assessing students' English proficiency and shaping their academic and professional trajectories. This study investigates the intended and actual washback effects of MUET, focusing on how the test influences learning behaviours and career aspirations. Employing a mixed-methods exploratory design, the study involved semi-structured interviews with test developer, as well as a survey of 283 MUET test-takers to analyse their experiences and attitudes. The findings indicate that MUET is widely regarded as an important and influential test, aligning with its intended washback of promoting structured language learning and international recognition. The correlation analysis reveals that students who perceive MUET as important tend to have higher motivation and report improved English proficiency. However, gaps in preparation and limited engagement with CEFR standards suggest that the intended washback is not fully realized in practice. Additionally, students acknowledge MUET's impact on career aspirations, yet concerns remain regarding fairness in assessment and institutional support. A thematic analysis of qualitative data further highlights test preparation challenges, the influence of MUET on teaching methodologies, and varying perceptions of test fairness. While some students benefit from structured preparation, others struggle with inadequate practice opportunities and lack of clarity regarding assessment criteria. The study also identifies moderate relationships between preparation support and performance, indicating that institutional interventions play a role but may not be sufficient in bridging preparation gaps. These findings suggest that MUET's positive washback could be enhanced by improving institutional support, refining test preparation strategies, and strengthening alignment with CEFR frameworks. Policymakers and educators should focus on making MUET preparation more accessible, ensuring fairness in assessment, and reinforcing its role in career readiness. Future research should further examine causal relationships between instructional practices, test preparation, and performance outcomes to optimize the test's effectiveness as a standardized English assessment tool.

Keywords:

MUET; washback; CEFR; Malaysia

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1. Introduction

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) plays a pivotal role in shaping students' educational trajectories in Malaysia. As a high-stakes English proficiency assessment, MUET influences students' access to higher education, scholarship opportunities, and career prospects. Given the test's substantial impact, understanding its washback effects on students' learning experiences is crucial. Washback, defined as the influence of a test on teaching, learning, and assessment practices, is a key concept in language testing research [1]. Understanding the washback effects of MUET is essential for evaluating its effectiveness in meeting its intended objectives. Moss *et al.*, [2] argue that assessment practices contribute to the social construction of reality, shaping how test scores are interpreted and utilized. Similarly, Cheng [3] highlights that washback can be positive or negative, depending on how testing influences pedagogical approaches and learning behaviors. MUET, as a standardized test aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), aims to promote positive washback by encouraging students to develop language skills required for academic and professional settings. However, concerns have been raised about potential negative washback effects, such as teaching to the test, reduced creativity in language use, and unequal access to test preparation resources [4,5]. This study investigates the washback effects of MUET, specifically examining how the test shapes educational practices and influences students' learning behaviours. By exploring both intended and actual washback, this research aims to provide insights into whether MUET effectively supports language learning or inadvertently creates barriers for students. Two research questions were devised in relation to the objective of this study:

- i. What are the intended consequences of MUET, and what procedures do test developers implement to achieve these outcomes?
- ii. How does MUET influence students' learning behaviors and test performance?

1.1 MUET and Its Role in Malaysian Education

The Malaysian education system places a strong emphasis on English language proficiency as a key competency for academic and professional success. The Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025) highlights concerns regarding graduates' critical thinking, communication skills, and English proficiency, emphasizing the need for standardized assessments to ensure language competency. MUET serves as a gateway for university admission and is increasingly recognized in professional and governmental sectors as an indicator of English proficiency [6,7]. Established in 1999, MUET has undergone multiple revisions, with the most recent in 2021 aligning its test components with CEFR standards. The test assesses four language skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and provides an aggregate score ranging from 1 to 360, mapped onto CEFR bands (1 to 5+). This alignment aims to enhance MUET's international recognition and ensure comparability with other standardized tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL [8]. Despite these revisions, concerns remain about the test's impact on teaching and learning. Previous studies suggest that MUET preparation often leads to a narrowed focus on test-taking strategies rather than holistic language acquisition [4,9]. Additionally, disparities in students' access to test preparation resources raise questions about fairness and equity in language assessment outcomes [10].

1.2 Washback

The concept of washback has been extensively studied in the field of language testing. Alderson *et al.*, [1] first conceptualized washback as the effect of testing on teaching and learning. Subsequent research has explored its complexity, highlighting both positive and negative dimensions. Positive washback occurs when tests encourage beneficial learning behaviours, such as engagement with authentic language use and development of critical thinking skills [4]. Negative washback, conversely, arises when testing leads to rote memorization, a narrowed curriculum, and overemphasis on test-taking strategies at the expense of communicative competence [5]. Cheng [11] and Green [12] emphasize that high-stakes tests often exert strong washback effects, particularly in contexts where test scores influence academic and career opportunities. In Malaysia, studies have documented varying degrees of washback associated with MUET. For instance, previous study found that MUET preparation courses tend to prioritize exam-oriented instruction over comprehensive language development [10]. Similarly, another study highlighted that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face challenges in accessing quality MUET preparation, resulting in unequal educational opportunities [6]. Evaluating the washback effects of MUET is critical in assessing its role within Malaysia's language education policy. While MUET is designed to enhance language proficiency, its real impact depends on how it is implemented and perceived by educators and learners. This study builds on previous research by investigating the extent to which MUET generates positive or negative washback and identifying areas for improvement in its application across educational and professional settings.

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods exploratory design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the washback effects of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) on student learning outcomes. The exploratory nature of the research allows for an in-depth investigation of the multiple factors influencing these effects. The study is structured into two phases. Phase 1 involves semi-structured interviews with test developer from the Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia (MPM) to explore the intended washback of MUET, focusing on its design and implementation. Phase 2 includes a questionnaire survey administered to 283 MUET test-takers to collect quantitative data on their learning behaviours, perceptions, and test-related experiences. This sequential approach enables a holistic interpretation of the relationship between intended and actual washback effects.

2.1 Participants

The study involves three primary groups of participants. The first group comprises officer from MPM who is responsible for MUET's design and development. This semi-structured interview provides insights into MUET's intended washback and its alignment with national education policies. The second group includes a larger sample of 283 MUET test-takers, who participated in a structured questionnaire survey designed to quantify MUET's washback effects on student learning outcomes and test preparation behaviours.

2.2 Data Collection Methods

For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with test developer to explore the intended washback of MUET. The interview protocol was developed in alignment with the research questions, ensuring that key areas of interest were addressed. Interviews were conducted online, recorded, and transcribed for analysis. For the quantitative component, a structured questionnaire was administered to 283 students. The questionnaire was adapted from previous washback studies to ensure validity and reliability [11,13-16]. It included Likert-scale items (1–6 scale) measuring MUET's perceived difficulty, importance, and impact on learning behaviours. The survey was distributed electronically via Google Forms to facilitate efficient data collection.

2.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to MUET's intended and actual washback. NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate coding and pattern recognition, ensuring a structured approach to data analysis. The qualitative findings were presented using comparisons and pattern analysis to provide a clear and contextualized interpretation of the results. For the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics such as mean score were used to summarize student perceptions. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between MUET difficulty, importance, preparation, and performance. Additionally, comparative analysis was performed across different MUET bands to assess variations in washback effects among students of varying proficiency levels.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent before participating in interviews and surveys. Data were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality and ethical integrity. This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee under approval number RMC/RD/85/003/2022, ensuring compliance with research ethics standards. The research adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring that participants' rights and privacy were safeguarded throughout the study.

3. Results and Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, beginning with an analysis of intended washback, as derived from MUET's design, objectives, and expectations. The intended washback reflects the goals set by test developers to influence teaching and learning practices, student motivation, and broader educational outcomes. Following this, the actual washback is examined based on empirical data gathered from test-takers, focusing on their perceptions of MUET's impact on learning behaviors, performance, and future aspirations. By comparing intended and actual washback, this study evaluates the extent to which MUET achieves its intended effects and identifies areas for further refinement in test implementation and policy.

3.1 Intended Washback

The intended washback of MUET is presented in Figure 1.

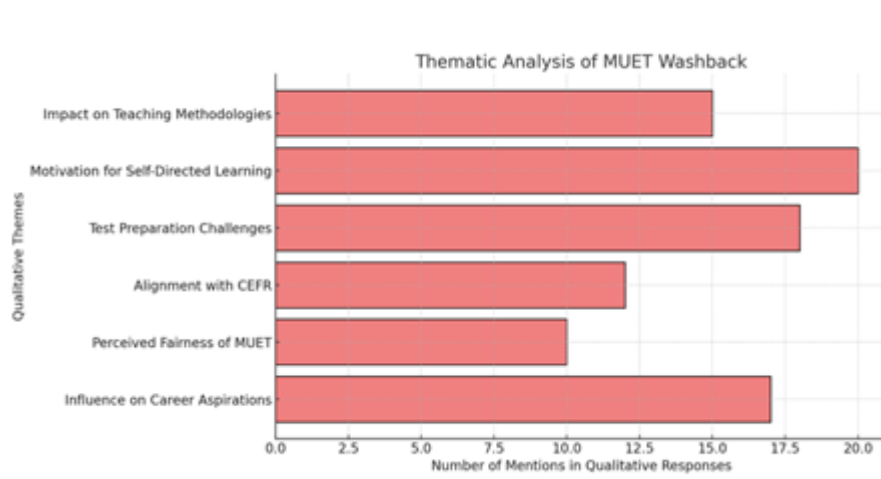


Fig. 1. Intended washback of MUET

The intended washback of MUET is centred on its role as a standardized English proficiency test aligned with CEFR, aimed at fostering a structured and measurable approach to English language learning. The test is designed to influence various aspects of teaching and learning, particularly in preparing students for higher education and professional communication. Test developers have emphasized that MUET should serve as both an assessment tool and a learning mechanism, encouraging students to develop critical language skills necessary for academic and professional settings. One key intended outcome is curriculum alignment, where MUET serves as a benchmark for secondary and tertiary education institutions to structure their English language courses. By aligning with CEFR, MUET aims to ensure that students develop competencies that meet international standards, making their English proficiency more globally recognized. This intended alignment with CEFR facilitates a structured progression of language skills, with clear proficiency bands indicating students' readiness for university coursework and professional communication.

Another intended washback effect is motivation for self-directed learning. Since MUET is a high-stakes test that influences university admissions and career prospects, it is expected to drive students toward independent learning practices. Test developers designed the test with the intention of encouraging students to engage in regular practice, exposure to authentic language materials, and critical thinking in writing and speaking tasks. By incorporating various task types, including academic reading, writing, and communicative speaking components, MUET is structured to promote holistic language development rather than rote memorization.

Moreover, MUET aims to impact teaching methodologies, encouraging instructors to adopt more communicative and skills-based approaches. Educators are expected to align their teaching practices with MUET's assessment criteria, leading to classroom instruction that emphasizes real-world language use, structured writing, and interactive speaking exercises. This intended washback seeks to bridge the gap between assessment and practical language use, ensuring that students acquire skills that extend beyond test-taking strategies. Finally, MUET is intended to enhance employability and international mobility, as its certification is increasingly recognized beyond Malaysia, particularly in Indonesia and China. The test aims to provide a standardized measure of English proficiency that employers and academic institutions can rely on for admissions and job placements. Test developers envision MUET as a gateway for students to access global opportunities, strengthening their ability to participate in international education and professional environments.

In brief, the intended washback of MUET revolves around standardization, motivation, curriculum alignment, pedagogical improvements, and global recognition. These objectives set the foundation for the test's role in shaping English language education and proficiency assessment in Malaysia.

However, the extent to which these intended effects translate into actual student and teacher experiences requires further examination, which is explored in the following section on actual washback.

3.2 Actual Washback

The descriptive analysis of MUET washback variables provides valuable insights into students' perceptions of the test's difficulty, importance, preparation, and overall impact on their academic and professional aspirations. Figure 2 illustrates the mean score of key MUET washback variables.

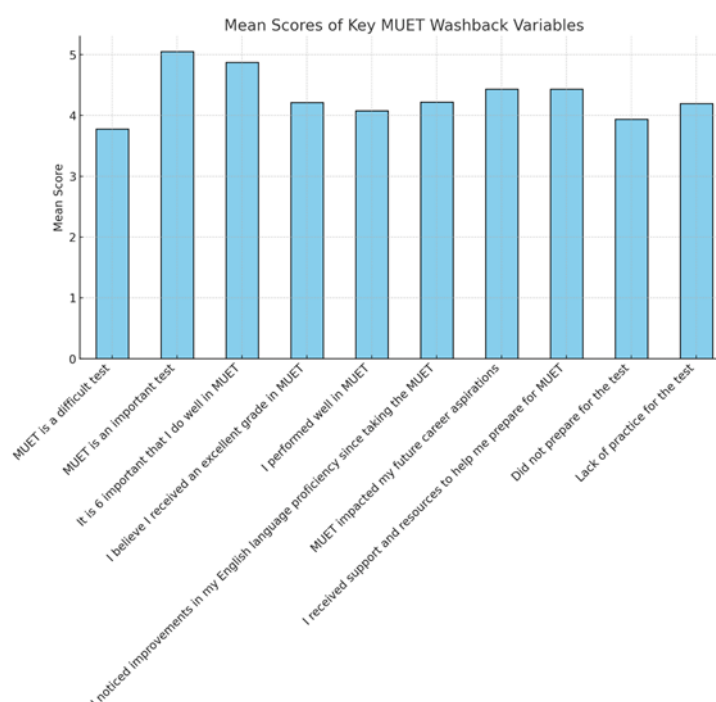


Fig. 2. Mean score of key MUET washback variables

The results indicate that MUET holds a significant place in students' educational experiences, with varying degrees of influence on different aspects of their learning. The highest-rated variable in the dataset is the perception that "MUET is an important test" ($M = 5.05$), suggesting that students widely recognize the significance of MUET in their academic journey. Similarly, students strongly believe that "It is important that I do well in MUET" ($M = 4.87$), reinforcing its high-stakes nature and the pressure it places on candidates to perform well. These findings indicate that MUET is perceived as a major academic milestone, influencing students' study behaviours and future planning.

Regarding test difficulty and student performance, the results suggest that MUET is moderately challenging ($M = 3.77$). This score indicates that while students acknowledge a certain level of difficulty, the test is not perceived as overwhelmingly hard. However, students' self-reported performance levels are moderate, with "I believe I received an excellent grade in MUET" ($M = 4.22$) and "I performed well in MUET" ($M = 4.07$). These scores suggest that students generally feel they have done well but may not be entirely confident in their performance. This finding highlights the need for further investigation into how test preparation and institutional support contribute to student confidence in their MUET results. In terms of learning and career implications, students reported that MUET positively influenced their English proficiency ($M = 4.22$), suggesting that the test has a beneficial washback effect on language learning. Additionally, students acknowledged that

MUET impacted their future career aspirations ($M = 4.43$), indicating its perceived value beyond university admissions. These findings support the argument that standardized language proficiency tests such as MUET can shape both academic and professional trajectories. Preparation and support for MUET appear to be relatively adequate, with “I received support and resources to help me prepare for MUET” receiving a mean score of 4.43. This suggests that students generally feel they have access to necessary materials and guidance. However, a notable portion of students admitted to insufficient preparation ($M = 3.93$) and a lack of practice opportunities ($M = 4.19$). These findings highlight a potential area of concern, as inadequate preparation and practice may hinder students from achieving their full potential in the test. In conclusion, the findings suggest that MUET is widely perceived as an important and beneficial test, with positive washback effects on language proficiency and career prospects. However, moderate self-reported performance scores and concerns about preparation indicate that further support and engagement strategies may be necessary to optimize test readiness. These insights can inform educators, policymakers, and test developers in refining MUET’s implementation and enhancing its role in fostering English language proficiency among students. Future research could explore the role of institutional support in reducing variability in student preparation and examining the long-term impact of MUET performance on academic and career success. The correlation analysis examined the relationships between key MUET washback variables, including perceptions of test difficulty, importance, preparation, performance, and career impact. Figure 3 illustrates the correlation analysis.

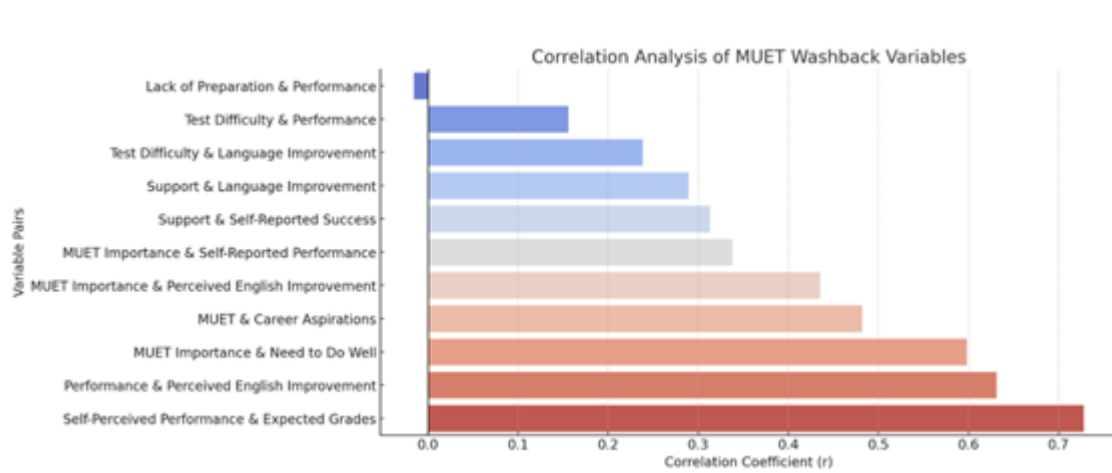


Fig. 3. Correlation analysis

The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the strength and direction of these relationships. Findings reveal a strong positive correlation between MUET importance and the belief that doing well in MUET is crucial ($r = 0.598$), reinforcing its high-stakes nature. Additionally, MUET importance is positively linked to self-reported performance ($r = 0.338$) and perceived English proficiency improvement ($r = 0.435$), indicating that students who value MUET tend to attribute their language development to it. A strong association was found between self-perceived performance and expected grades ($r = 0.728$), as well as between performance and perceived English improvement ($r = 0.631$). This suggests that students who believe they performed well also feel that MUET contributed to their language skills. Furthermore, MUET’s perceived impact on career aspirations ($r = 0.482$) highlights its relevance beyond academics.

Preparation and resource support play a role in performance, with support positively correlating with self-reported success ($r = 0.313$) and language improvement ($r = 0.289$). However, lack of preparation shows little impact on performance ($r = -0.016$), suggesting that other factors, such as

test-taking strategies or prior proficiency, influence success. Additionally, test difficulty is weakly correlated with performance ($r = 0.156$) and language improvement ($r = 0.238$), indicating that perceived difficulty does not strongly dictate outcomes. It is safe to conclude that MUET's perceived importance influences motivation and self-reported success, while institutional support enhances preparation and performance. However, test difficulty does not significantly impact outcomes. These findings highlight the need to reinforce MUET's role in career readiness, enhance preparation strategies, and ensure institutional support to optimize its washback effects. Future studies should further explore causal relationships between preparation strategies and actual performance to enhance positive washback.

3.2 Mapping Intended vs. Actual Washback

The comparison between intended washback (as outlined by MUET's design) and actual washback (as reported by students) provides critical insights into the extent to which MUET achieves its objectives. Figure 4 below shows the mapping of the intended washback and the actual washback.

Mapping Of Intended Vs. Actual Washback		
	Intended Washback	Actual Washback (Based on Data)
1	Alignment with CEFR and Standardization	MUET is an important test ($M = 5.05$)
2	Preparation for Higher Education	MUET impacts career aspirations ($M = 4.43$)
3	Impact on Teaching and Learning	Students believe MUET improves English proficiency ($M = 4.22$)
4	Progressive Assessment and Candidate	Performance is linked to self-perceived proficiency ($r = 0.631$)
5	Broadening Access and Use Beyond Academia	Students see MUET as relevant beyond university ($r = 0.482$)
6	Revised Test Structure for Practical	Test preparation is influenced by institutional support ($M = 4.43$)
7	Reliability and Psychometric Validation	Moderate correlation between performance & perceived fairness ($r = 0.313$)
8	Expansion and International Recognition	Students recognize MUET's international role, but engagement varies

Fig. 4. Mapping of the intended and actual washback

One of the primary aims of MUET is its alignment with CEFR and standardization, ensuring comparability with international English proficiency tests. The data suggest that students perceive MUET as an important test ($M = 5.05$), reinforcing its high-stakes nature. However, there is little direct evidence that students actively engage with CEFR standards, indicating a potential gap between MUET's intended alignment and students' understanding of its framework. Another key objective of MUET is to facilitate preparation for higher education by assessing students' readiness for academic coursework. The findings indicate that MUET impacts career aspirations ($M = 4.43$), suggesting that students recognize its significance beyond university admission. However, a notable portion of students report insufficient preparation ($M = 3.93$), highlighting disparities in test readiness and institutional support. While students acknowledge improvements in their English

proficiency ($M = 4.22$), it remains uncertain whether these improvements stem directly from MUET's influence or broader educational experiences.

MUET is also intended to shape teaching and learning practices, encouraging structured English instruction. The data suggest a strong correlation between perceived test performance and English proficiency improvement ($r = 0.631$), indicating positive washback effects. However, whether MUET directly influences classroom pedagogy remains unclear. Additionally, the test's progressive assessment system, aimed at motivating students to improve over multiple attempts, lacks direct empirical support from the dataset, as there is limited evidence of retesting behaviour among students. Beyond academia, MUET aspires to broaden its accessibility for professional and international recognition. The findings suggest that students acknowledge MUET's role beyond university ($r = 0.482$), reinforcing its relevance in career pathways. However, engagement levels vary, and while institutional support for preparation is rated relatively high ($M = 4.43$), the correlation between performance and perceived fairness is only moderate ($r = 0.313$), suggesting that some students may question whether the test adequately reflects their language abilities.

The reliability and psychometric validation of MUET ensure fairness in assessment, yet students' perceptions of fairness and performance only show a moderate correlation ($r = 0.313$), indicating potential concerns regarding score interpretation. Finally, while MUET aims for international expansion, particularly in Indonesia and China, student engagement with MUET's global role is inconsistent, suggesting that further efforts are needed to strengthen its international appeal. Therefore, MUET's perceived importance strongly influences student motivation and career considerations, and students acknowledge its role in improving language proficiency. However, preparation gaps, variability in engagement with CEFR, and concerns over fairness and applicability indicate areas for refinement. Strengthening test preparation strategies, enhancing awareness of MUET's alignment with CEFR, and ensuring better access to institutional support will be crucial in optimizing MUET's washback effects. These findings provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and test developers in refining MUET's role in fostering effective and equitable language learning.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the intended and actual washback of MUET, highlighting both its strengths and areas for improvement. The analysis suggests that MUET is widely perceived as an important and influential test, with students recognizing its role in academic and career development. The strong correlation between MUET importance and career aspirations ($r = 0.482$) reinforces previous findings that high-stakes language assessments shape learners' future trajectories [6,7]. However, the preparation gap identified, where students report insufficient preparation ($M = 3.93$), aligns with concerns in previous research that some students struggle to engage in meaningful test preparation due to accessibility issues [5,8]. One of the core objectives of MUET is to promote positive washback in language learning, encouraging structured teaching and self-directed learning. The correlation between self-reported MUET performance and perceived English proficiency improvement ($r = 0.631$) suggests that many students associate their success in MUET with their language development. This finding aligns with research by Cheng [3] and Green [12], which highlight the potential for language tests to serve as motivational tools for learners. However, the moderate correlation between institutional support and performance ($r = 0.313$) suggests that while students receive assistance, the extent to which this support translates into higher achievement remains limited. Similar concerns have been raised in previous studies emphasizing the role of institutional intervention in test preparation [4,7].

Additionally, MUET's role in broadening access to global opportunities is partially supported by the findings. The test is seen as important beyond university settings ($r = 0.482$), yet variability in student engagement suggests that further efforts are needed to enhance international recognition and ensure practical alignment with global English proficiency expectations. While MUET aligns with CEFR standards, the lack of direct engagement with CEFR frameworks by students raises questions about how effectively this alignment is communicated or implemented in teaching and assessment [8]. The study also highlights a concern over fairness and test impact, as the correlation between MUET performance and perceived fairness is moderate ($r = 0.313$). This suggests that while students acknowledge MUET's role in their learning and careers, they may not fully trust its fairness as an assessment tool. This aligns with previous research questioning the validity and fairness of standardized English proficiency tests [11,12]. Future reforms should consider how test-takers perceive MUET's ability to accurately reflect their English abilities and ensure that assessment practices remain equitable and transparent.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on language assessment washback effects by examining how MUET, a high-stakes English proficiency test in Malaysia, aligns with its intended objectives. The findings indicate that MUET successfully reinforces its role as an important measure of language proficiency, with students acknowledging its impact on academic and career aspirations. Furthermore, positive washback effects are observed in students' perceived English language improvements and motivation to succeed. However, gaps in preparation, engagement with CEFR, and concerns about fairness suggest areas for further refinement. To optimize MUET's positive washback, policymakers and educators should focus on enhancing institutional support for test preparation, promoting better awareness of MUET's alignment with CEFR, and ensuring fairness in assessment practices. Future research should explore how different preparation strategies and instructional interventions affect actual MUET performance to further refine its role as a standardized English proficiency test. These findings serve as a valuable resource for language policymakers, test developers, and educators, reinforcing the need for continuous evaluation and improvement of high-stakes language assessments [4,7,17].

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