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A guide to

English language policy making in higher education

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About the guides

The *Guides to English language policy-making in higher education* are the result of a collaboration between IEAA, academic and operational practitioners and are designed to provide a set of accessible, state-of-the-art tools to help university policy-makers and admission teams in higher education contexts understand some of the complexities of English language proficiency in higher education at various key points in the student lifecycle, including at admissions, during study, and at exit. For admissions staff, the guides also include a guiding framework that can be used to evaluate and select tests for admissions purposes. We hope that the document will be a useful tool for anyone involved in making decisions around English language policies in higher education.

The guides do not need to be read from front to back – they are designed according to topic areas. We hope that users will quickly identify the topics they are interested in. Ample cross-references have also been included across the document.

The *Guides to English language policy-making in higher education* are also not considered complete. We rather see them as a living document to which we will add additional information or which we will revise as needed to account for changing circumstances, new research knowledge or changes in policy settings. The content of the guides should apply in any context where English is used as a medium-of-instruction, although the policy section is written with Australia in mind. Please contact Ute Knoch (uknoch@unimelb.edu.au), should you have any recommendations for revisions.

We hope you find the document useful.

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Suggested citation

Knoch, U. (2021), 'A guide to English language policy making in higher education', International Education Association of Australia (IEAA). Retrieved from www.ieaa.org.au.

This paper was published by International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) in November 2021.

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admission

study

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workplace

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1. What is language proficiency in post-secondary settings?

2. What is the relationship between language proficiency and academic success?

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3. A checklist for selecting English language tests for university entry

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Policy and governance requirements for English language in Higher Education

To situate any decision-making around English language policies for higher education providers, the relevant policy and governance requirements need to be taken into account. For the purpose of this guide, the focus is on the Australian requirements and guidelines.

Three policy guidelines, codes or frameworks are presented below: (1) Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) Higher Education Standards Framework (threshold standards) 2021, (2) ESOS National Code of Practice, (3) Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities.

While the first two are official Australian acts and therefore compulsory, the Good Practice Principles form a set of recommendations for institutions.

TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021

The TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) sets out the Threshold Standards against which the quality of education is assessed by TEQSA. The document is divided into two Parts: Part A – Standards for Higher Education (setting out the minimum acceptable requirements for the provision of higher education registered under the TEQSA act), and Part B – Criteria for Higher Education Providers. The following clauses are particularly relevant to English language policy-making.

1.1 Admission

1. Admissions policies, requirements and procedures are documented, are applied fairly and consistently, and are designed to ensure that admitted students have the academic preparation and proficiency in English needed to participate in their intended study, and no known limitations that would be expected to impede their progression and completion.

1.3 Orientation and Progression

2. Specific strategies support transition, including:
 - a. assessing the needs and preparedness of individual students and cohorts
 - b. undertaking early assessment or review that provides formative feedback on academic progress and is able to identify needs for additional support, and
 - c. providing access to informed advice and timely referral to academic or other support.
3. Methods of assessment or monitoring that determine progress within or between units of study or in research training validly assess progress and, in the case of formative assessment, provide students with timely feedback that assists in their achievement of learning outcomes.
4. Processes that identify students at risk of unsatisfactory progress and provide specific support are implemented across all courses of study.
5. Trends in rates of retention, progression and completion of student cohorts through courses of study are monitored to enable review and improvement.
6. Students have equivalent opportunities for successful transition into and progression through their course of study, irrespective of their educational background, entry pathway, mode or place of study.

1.4 Learning outcomes and assessment

1. The expected learning outcomes for each course of study are specified, consistent with the level and field of education of the qualification awarded, and informed by national and international comparators.
2. The specified learning outcomes for each course of study encompass discipline-related and generic outcomes, including:
 - a. specific knowledge and skills and their application that characterise the field(s) of education or disciplines involved
 - b. generic skills and their application in the context of the field(s) of education or disciplines involved
 - c. knowledge and skills required for employment and further study related to the course of study, including those required to be eligible to seek registration to practise where applicable, and
 - d. skills in independent and critical thinking suitable for life-long learning.
3. Methods of assessment are consistent with the learning outcomes being assessed, are capable of confirming that all specified learning outcomes are achieved and that grades awarded reflect the level of student attainment.
4. On completion of a course of study, students have demonstrated the learning outcomes specified for the course of study, whether assessed at unit level, course level, or in combination.

2.2 Diversity and equity

1. Institutional policies, practices and approaches to teaching and learning are designed to accommodate student diversity, including the under-representation and/or disadvantage experienced by identified groups, and create equivalent opportunities for academic success regardless of students' backgrounds.
3. Participation, progress, and completion by identified student subgroups are monitored and the findings are used to inform admission policies and improvement of teaching, learning and support strategies for those subgroups.

5.3 Monitoring, review and improvement

7. The results of regular interim monitoring, comprehensive reviews, external referencing and student feedback are used to mitigate future risks to the quality of the education provided and to guide and evaluate improvements, including the use of data on student progress and success to inform admission criteria and approaches to course design, teaching, supervision, learning and academic support.

7.2 Information for prospective and current students

- 4.e. Information to facilitate access to services and support including the types of services available such as educational resources including English language support [...], hours of availability, how to access services [...]

ESOS National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018

The National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018 (National Code 2018) supports the National Strategy for International Education 2025. It is a legislative instrument made under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 and sets nationally consistent standards to support providers to deliver quality education and training to overseas students. Education providers must comply with the National Code to maintain their registration to provide education services to overseas students.

The Code is divided into a number of standards. The following standards are particularly relevant to English language policy-making in higher education institutions:

Standard 2: Recruitment of an overseas student

(extract): Recruitment of an overseas student (Standard 2) Standard 2 ensures registered providers recruit responsibly by ensuring international students are appropriately qualified for a course, including having the necessary English language proficiency,

educational qualifications and/or work experience.

Standard 6: Overseas student support services

(extract) Standard 6 continues to focus on student support services. Registered providers must give international students information about support services to assist international students in adjusting to study and life in Australia. In particular, registered providers must provide information about services international students can access for information on their employment rights and conditions and how to resolve workplace issues, such as through the Fair Work Ombudsman. This must be done through the orientation program, and the international student must be given information or a referral if they seek assistance from the registered provider. Registered providers must also offer reasonable support at no additional cost to international students to assist them to achieve expected learning outcomes, regardless of the international student's mode of study.

Good practice principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities

In 2007, following extensive media coverage and public debate on the English language exit standards of overseas students (see, e.g., Birrell, 2006), a national symposium was organised by an Australian federal government agency which led to the creation of the Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities (AUQA, 2009). The principles have been highly influential in institutions reviewing their practices and are being used by AUQA's successor, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) when conducting audits. The ten principles are further divided into thematic areas:

1. University-wide Strategy, Policy and Resourcing

2. Prospective Students and Entry Standards
3. Curriculum Design and Delivery
4. Transition and Social and Academic Interaction
5. Quality Assurance

The principles are set out below:

Principle 1

Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies.

Principle 2

Resourcing for English language development is adequate to meet students' needs throughout their studies.

Principle 3

Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment.

Principle 4

Universities ensure that the English language entry pathways they approve for the admission of students enable these students to participate effectively in their studies.

Principle 5

English language proficiency and communication skills are important graduate attributes for all students.

Principle 6

Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods.

Principle 7

Students' English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.

Principle 8

International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments.

Principle 9

International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus.

Principle 10

Universities use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve their English language development activities.

The final report sets out a range of considerations and recommendations for higher education providers. And while the principles were designed for international students, there is recognition that they should be extended to all students, regardless of background.

TEQSA Publications

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency regularly publishes up-to-date reports, papers and guidance notes, including annual Compliance reports (see, e.g., TEQSA, 2021) which provide helpful information for higher education policy makers. TEQSA also regularly clarifies aspects of policy, as for example a recent updated clarification of what constitutes an English language waiver (<https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/english-waivers-definition>).

TEQSA provide some very useful guidance in addition to laying out the foundations of admissions and compliance expectations in the monitoring and reporting of English language for international students. This guidance is especially useful to safeguard processes around the admissions of English language proficiency of international students in light of the lingering impacts of media reports around quality issues that surfaced in 2018. TEQSA recommends that providers can do the following (TEQSA, 2020, p.10):

- Ensure analysis of student cohort data is systematically used to track poorly performing cohorts and academic misconduct issues back to student entry pathways, basis of admission, country/region of origin and agents
- Ensure governance bodies have sufficient oversight of policies and practice and to

ensure they are being followed

- Ensure admission policies and delegations are being adhered to stringently
- Ensure admissions practices are regularly reviewed, benchmarked and improved
- If things go wrong, ensure a prompt, comprehensive and transparent response
- Notify TEQSA if an event happens.

English language reporting from PRISMS

There is a wealth of information captured in PRISMS around English language proficiency that can help individual providers to report on their current practices. PRISMS also captures agent information so it is easy to link students with agents and report on that information, should it be required. One of the areas that was of interest to the regulator around English language proficiency was the use of the category “Other forms of testing”. Since October 2019, the categories of English language drop down options on COEs has been streamlined but there is still a high level of discretion as to how providers use and report on those categories.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that higher education providers ensure they comply with all official directions regarding English language admissions policies, and support mechanisms of students who have entered universities.
2. It is recommended that higher education institutions monitor and track student performance throughout student degrees and that this monitoring is further disaggregated by students' English language entry pathway.
3. It is recommended that the information from student monitoring is used to regularly review and adjust policies, in particular admission policies.

1. What is language proficiency in a post-secondary setting?

Understanding the language proficiency demands of post-secondary settings is helpful in policy-making. This guide sets out a basic model of what language proficiency in post-secondary contexts entails, and shows which aspects are and are not included in language proficiency tests. Some recommendations for English testing in post-secondary contexts are detailed at the end of the guide.

Modelling language proficiency

Models of language proficiency have been proposed for various contexts, but are limited in that they are either focussed on general language proficiency (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996) or university language only (Harper, Prentice, & Wilson, 2011; Murray, 2010, 2016). There do not seem to be any such models for workplace language proficiency. Existing models are not only limited in scope, but also lack the simplicity needed for policy-making purposes in higher education, and for this reason a simple but comprehensive model is proposed below. The model draws on existing models and is designed to distinguish between various aspects of language proficiency of importance to language policy-making and language testing decisions.

The figure below depicts various aspects/levels of language proficiency and skills that might be encountered in post-secondary contexts.

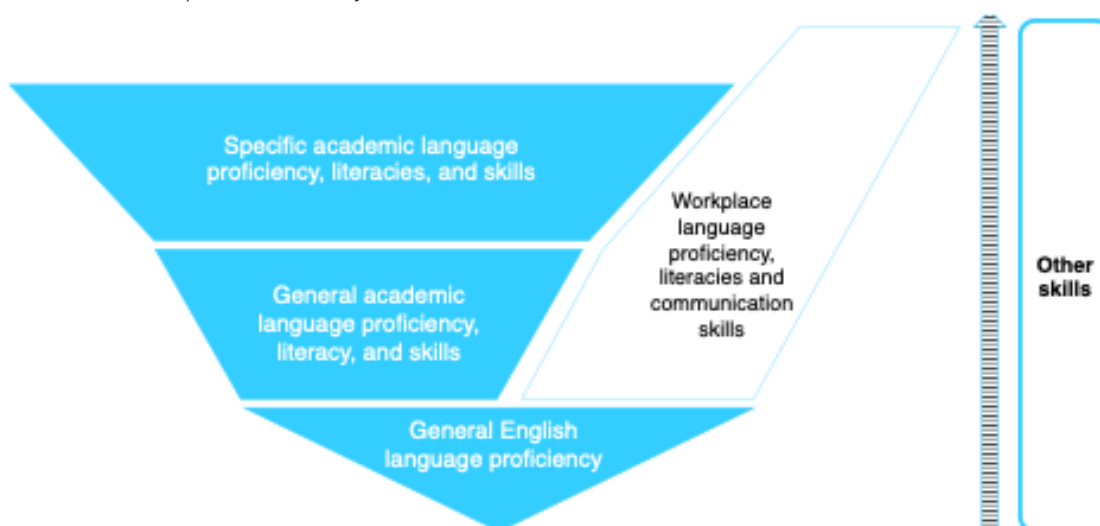
The model has five broad components:

- General English language proficiency
- General academic language proficiency, literacy, and skills
- Specific academic language proficiency, literacies, and skills
- Workplace language proficiency, literacies, and communication skills
- Other skills

General English language proficiency

General English language proficiency is the most basic, general building block of the model. It includes the following aspects:

- Language skills – speaking, listening, and for most people reading and writing
- Across the four language skills, linguistic structures and phenomena, such as grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics (e.g., politeness strategies), phonology



Most people who speak English as their home/first language are presumed to be competent in these aspects. General English language proficiency is usually also the first aspect of English language proficiency that learners of English, as an additional language, will be exposed to. General English language proficiency underpins all other components in the model and it is believed that a certain threshold is needed to be able to acquire any of the other aspects (see e.g., Murray, 2010).

General academic English language proficiency

The second building block, **General academic language proficiency, literacy and skills**, is what most students would be exposed to at the upper levels of high school (if in English), in university foundation and pathway programs, and in the first year(s) of university, in particular if students take subjects not directly related to their specialist field of study. This may include any of the following aspects:

- Understanding of generic academic vocabulary relevant to most domains
- Universal elements of academic expression (e.g., formality of style) used across common academic tasks (e.g., writing essays, giving presentations)
- Understanding of textual conventions used

across common academic tasks

- Understanding of plagiarism, referencing conventions, paraphrasing
- Editing and proof-reading
- Oral presentation skills
- Ability to source information (information literacy)*
- Note-taking*
- Study skills*
- Information management*
- Group-work skills*
- Critical thinking skills, including identifying and formulating arguments*

Specific academic English language proficiency

Specific academic language proficiency, literacies and skills is the third building block in the model. This relates to language and literacy specific to the student's discipline and may include any of the following:

- Mastery of vocabulary specific to domain of study (this can get increasingly specific as specialist study progresses)
- Conversancy with texts, written genres, conventions, and expectations specific to academic discipline
- Analysis, critical reflection and evaluation of specialist readings
- Giving or participating in seminars specific to discipline

Examples of differences between General English Proficiency, General Academic English Proficiency and Specific Academic English Proficiency

General English Proficiency: The water is dirty because people keep dumping rubbish in it.

General Academic English proficiency: The water is polluted due to rubbish disposal in and around the area.

Specific Academic English proficiency: Tests of 22 water quality parameters showed high pollution loads due to anthropogenic activities such as urban waste in the inland river catchment area.

** Please note that some of the skills listed above are outside of the remit of academic English proficiency per se; some of these may be developed in any language, and already before entry into an English medium degree. However, they are skills that students often struggle with when entering university and are often the focus of English language courses preparing students for university entry.*

Workplace language proficiency, literacies and communication skills

Finally, **Workplace language proficiency, literacies and communication skills** are related to the language used in specific workplaces. Language in workplaces differs vastly, some workplaces draw on a highly restricted code (e.g., air traffic controllers and pilots), while language in other workplaces is much less restricted and specific. All new workplace entrants (regardless of their language background) need to learn aspects of communication when they first enter a new workplace. Specific aspects of workplace language may be:

- Using workplace terminology specific to workplace and role, including acronyms, abbreviations.
- Using specific workplace registers
- Ability to communicate appropriately across various groups of interlocutors (e.g., colleagues with the same background or specialisation, colleagues from other specialisations, clients etc)
- Understanding specific workplace text types and conventions
- Drawing on pragmatic and social competence needed for workplace functioning (to establish rapport with colleagues, clients to reach consensus etc).

Workplace language proficiency, literacies and communication skills may be partially learned at university (e.g., on work placements) for specific professions. However, for many degrees, in particular those that do not directly link to a specific profession or where workplaces are too diverse, this may not be the case. All graduates will need to be acculturated into workplace language proficiency, literacies and communication skills following graduation. It is unrealistic of employers to expect graduates to be fully proficient in all these aspects.

Other skills

A number of **Other skills** may underpin all aspects in the model above, including, but not limited to:

- Non-verbal communication skills
- Intercultural competence
- Interpersonal skills
- Digital literacy

Although the **Arrow on the right of the figure** on page 9 implies that the different aspects in the model may develop in linear fashion, this is not always the case. Everyone starts with general English language proficiency (which in itself is not clearly defined), but some may never proceed past this aspect. The other levels are experienced depending on education level and the contexts a person is exposed to and the extent of their experience in the different domains.

Language tests used for university entrance: What aspects of language do they cover?

English language tests differ widely in what they measure, with some focussing mainly on general English proficiency, and others focussing on some aspects of general academic English. Even tests designed for general academic English purposes differ widely in what they measure. These tests never assess all the aspects listed above in the section on general academic English language tests.

It is important that tests are carefully scrutinized before they are being used for university entry, and that higher education institutions understand what abilities the tests can provide predictions about and which not (**Refer to Guide 3: Selecting English language tests for university entry**). Additional training may be required for students in aspects not covered by the tests.

Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations that follow from the model presented above:

1. General English language proficiency tests are unlikely to be good predictors of English language ability in the academic domain because they do not tap into any of the general academic English language proficiency, literacies and skills required at university.
2. General academic English language proficiency tests generally are not designed to assess academic skills (such as study skills, ability to use referencing, critical thinking etc). Students who are admitted to higher education based on General academic English language proficiency tests may struggle with these skills and may require ongoing support and opportunities for further learning.
3. Reports of students who struggle with the language requirements at university may not necessarily be a result of institutions having set entrance scores too low (**Refer to Guide 4: Setting English language entry standards**). It may instead be that the skills students struggle with are not covered by the English language tests required for admission. Raising entry requirements may therefore not be the best solution to language problems. Setting cut-scores too high may also mean that an institution misses out on highly capable students. Selecting the right test is crucial and setting minimum scores to minimize false negatives and positives in light of support available on campus is important (**Refer to Guide 9: Providing ongoing feedback and support**). For students identified as at risk of low performance or failure, further investigations into the causes of problems are needed, such as detailed tracking studies comparing outcomes of students entering through different pathways.
4. All students (regardless of language background) will require support to learn key aspects of general academic, specific academic (and workplace language proficiency, if relevant), as these skills and abilities will be new to all students. Post-entry assessments (**Refer to Guide 7: Post-entry language assessment**) may be used to identify specific areas in which students may require further support. It is recommended that this support is offered to all students post-admission, rather than focussing only on students from English as an additional language background (**Refer to Guide 9: Providing ongoing feedback and support**).
5. English language pathway courses (**Refer to Guide 6: Other evidence of language proficiency**) are likely to cover more academic skills (such as study skills, ability to use referencing, critical thinking etc) than general academic English language proficiency tests assess (see point 2 above). For this reason, mapping pathway assessments to general academic English tests may not be helpful, as pathway courses are designed to teach and assess a broader set of academic skills. Mapping courses against English language proficiency test scores is a common practice by university administrators before accepting pathway courses as equivalent English language entry requirements. This practice of comparing these two outcomes does not capture the much broader nature of what is taught and assessed in pathway courses.
6. Using a general academic English test at the point of university exit may not be tapping into the specific disciplinary language skills learned in higher education or indeed to the skills required for the workplace.
7. Workplace language proficiency, literacies and skills are sometimes part of university study, but are often not the focus of higher education (in particular where courses are not designed to lead to specific professions or workplaces). Most of these skills are learned by graduates once they enter workplaces, and this is the same for all graduates, regardless of language background.

2 What is the relationship between language proficiency and academic success?

Understanding the possible relationship between academic success and language testing scores is important to guide policy decisions. This guide summarises research that has looked at the relationship, points out some of the limitations of this research, and provides some recommendations for policy makers.

University administrators and policy makers are often interested in knowing just how much English language proficiency influences academic success. Many studies have investigated this question over the years, and while the methodologies used by researchers have differed, the overall findings show that language proficiency test scores predict between 5% and 15% of academic success as measured by GPA (grade point average).

Language proficiency is, of course, only one of many predictors of academic success. Other factors, such as study habits, content knowledge, area of study, motivation, number of courses attempted, a need to work a job or financial concerns, the integration into the larger community, as well as a range of other factors are all also important for academic success.

There are many methodological differences and limitations to studies that have been done on this relationship in the past:

- Some studies have not corrected for range restrictions in their correlations – all correlational studies of language test entry scores and GPA are by default always done on a restricted sample of students who have been admitted into university (as it is not possible to include language test scores and GPAs of students who did not get accepted into university because of lower language test scores). It is therefore important to correct for this range restriction.
- Some studies have examined the relationship of overall test score and GPA, but recent research suggests that sub-scores (for listening, reading, speaking, writing) should be investigated.

- Many studies have drawn on relatively small samples (typically below 200)
- Many studies have combined students from different backgrounds and disciplines – recent evidence suggests that once these groups are disaggregated, the results may differ substantially for sub-groups, with the predictive validity changing for certain populations and sub-skill scores. One study found positive correlations between TOEFL scores and GPAs for humanities majors, but not for engineering students (Cho & Bridgeman, 2012)
- Student groups with discrepancies between their receptive (reading/listening) and productive skills (writing/speaking) seem to influence these correlations heavily.
- Studies have differed in both the sample investigated – for example, the level of study (undergraduate, post-graduate), study location (in English-speaking country, in other contexts) and the timepoint at which data is collected (e.g., after first semester, second semester or entire program)
- Using the GPA as a measure of achievement in higher education is also not without its problems, and how students are assessed across and within disciplines has been shown to be inconsistent.

Investigations of which sub-skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking) are most predictive of academic success have also differed depending on the study and the study sample.

Determining the particular proficiency threshold, at or below which students are unlikely to succeed academically, is critically important. Above that threshold, the role of language proficiency is more likely to be superseded by other factors.

Given the latter, setting minimum language proficiency requirements too high may be counter-productive in that it may not boost the chances of academic success and it may result in capable students not being included. (Refer to Guide 04: Setting appropriate English language tests for university entry).

Determining the particular proficiency threshold, at or below which students are unlikely to succeed academically, is critically important. Above that threshold, the role of language proficiency is more likely to be superseded by other factors.

Recommendations

1. Institutions may want to examine the relationship of English language entry scores and academic success in their own institutions. Such analyses, provided that there is sufficient data available, can provide useful information for specific programs within the university (or for specific sub-populations) and can feed into subsequent policy decisions on minimum entry scores (for a useful example of a study conducted at Purdue university in the US, refer to Ginther & Yan, 2018).
2. When setting entry requirements be wary of relying too heavily on decisions made by other institutions since the contexts and culture of different institutions differ greatly, and it is also often not clear how they arrived at their entry requirements.
3. Work towards localized evidenced-based policy by:
 - a. Setting up routine procedures for monitoring relationships between initial proficiency scores and GPA, taking the factors described above into account
 - b. Consider the impact of raising and lowering cut-scores on academic outcome

3. A checklist for selecting english language tests for university entry

When accepting a new test for university entry, it is important that it is carefully evaluated against a number of criteria to ensure that it is a good measure of English language proficiency for academic contexts. If a test does not fulfil certain key criteria, it may not be able to predict well whether a student will be able to cope with the language demands of higher education.

This guide sets out a number of criteria that should be reviewed when considering new tests for university entry. These are organised in the following categories:

- Criteria applicable to all tests.
- Additional criteria applicable to online tests (administered on the premises of testing agencies).
- Additional criteria applicable to at-home online tests.

Checklist for selecting tests for university admission – criteria applicable to all tests

This section presents a checklist of features that should be considered when accepting a test for university entry.

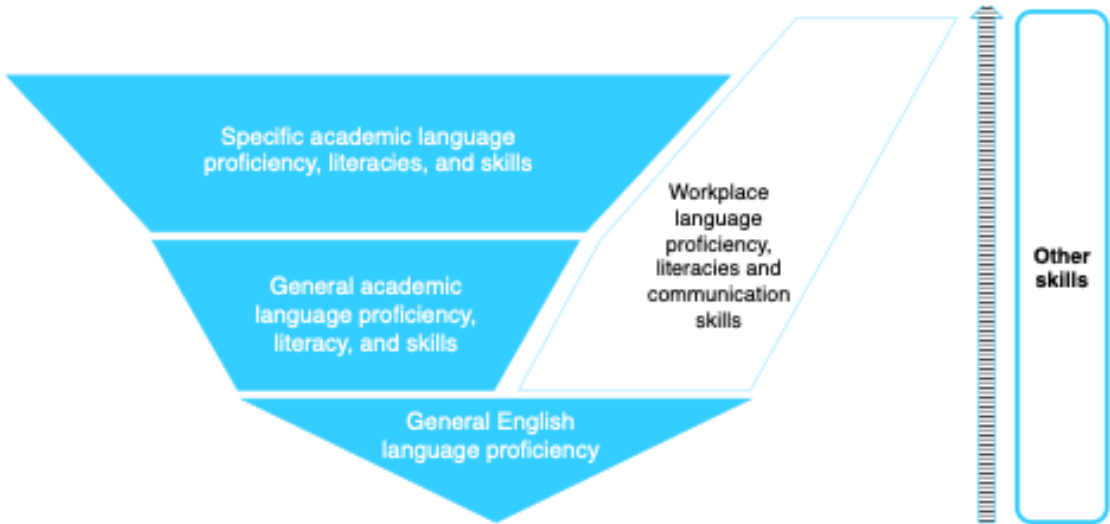
☒	☐	DOES THE TEST MEASURE ACADEMIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY?
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The **Guide 01: What is language proficiency in a post-secondary setting?** presented a model of language proficiency relevant to higher education – this has been reproduced again here, but not all the details have been included to save space. In the model, language proficiency is divided into several components – General English language proficiency and General academic language proficiency are relevant to this point.

So one of the first items to check when considering a new test is whether it is designed to model, as much as possible, the language requirements of the academic domain.

Why?

For a test to predict how well a student will cope with the language requirements at university, it needs to be designed to elicit similar language to that required in the university domain. For students entering university for undergraduate study, general academic language proficiency is required. A test of general English language



proficiency will not be able to provide enough information to tell you whether a student will be able to cope with the academic language requirements at university.

How?

There are a number of ways to establish this:

1. take a careful look at the statement of purpose on the test website. Test providers usually publish statements about what type of language the test is designed to measure.
2. examine the test tasks and consider whether these may be good tasks for students to show some of the features of academic language. One way to make this evaluation is to think about typical language-use tasks in academia (as presented in the image below taken from a presentation by Knoch, 2020), and compare these to the test tasks listed below.
3. ask the test provider whether any validity research has investigated the link between the test tasks and tasks in the academic domain for this particular test.

It is important, however, to remember that English language proficiency tests will always be poor measures of academic language

proficiency more broadly as tests are not able to measure everything that students might have to do with language as they start out at university.

☒	☒	DOES THE TEST PROVIDE SUFFICIENT INFORMATION FOR ENTRY DECISION-MAKING?
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Not all English language tests provide the information needed to make university entrance decisions. When accepting a new test, the following two aspects should be examined:

1. Does the test span the proficiency levels needed for decision-making?
2. Does the score report provide an overall score and sub-scores for speaking, writing, listening, and reading?

Why? How?

1. Does the test span the levels needed for decision-making?

Language proficiency is a continuum that spans from very little proficiency to high proficiency. Not all tests are designed to measure the entire continuum (in fact, most are not). It is therefore important to establish

listening

- extended listening (e.g. in lectures)
- listening to a range of people with a variety of accents
- listening to conversations in tutorials
- increasingly listening to videos.

speaking

- with classmates, lecturers, tutors (range of purposes and levels of formality)
- speaking in group situations
- need to show interactional competence

reading

- extended, often dense discourse
- reading under time pressure

writing

- extended responses
- writing often based on readings and prior listening to lecturers/tutorials

whether a test is designed to reliably measure language proficiency around the scores your institution has set for entry into various courses. If a test is designed to measure language proficiency at the required levels, it is recommended the test provider is asked what the standard error of measurement is around the score points that are particularly important for entry decisions. This is discussed in more detail in the following checklist item on reliability.

2. Does the score report provide an overall score and sub-scores for speaking, writing, listening, and reading?

Test providers include various details in score reports, from presenting an overall scaled score only to providing detailed breakdowns of scores for sub-tests. Most institutions set entry requirements across the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). For example, the minimum entry score for a certain degree may stipulate an overall score as well as a minimum score for writing. Not all tests are designed to measure all four skills or they may only provide information in the score report on an overall score. When accepting a new test, ensure that the score report presents sufficient information across the language skills to base entry decisions on.

☒	☒	IS THE TEST RELIABLE?
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Test reliability or precision is defined as to how consistently the test score is across different characteristics of the testing situation (Bachman, 1990). For example, is the test taker likely to receive the same score if given a different form of the test, or if they encounter a different examiner for their writing or speaking test. Reliability is usually established for different sub-tests (e.g., reading, listening, speaking, writing) separately, as well as for the overall test.

Why? How?

University entrance decisions are high-stakes in nature, and for this reason reliability of the test should be high. Reliability is usually

reported for the overall test. For receptive sub-tests (reading and listening) this should be above .8 and for sub-tests where human raters are engaged to make decisions (e.g., speaking and writing), it is recommended that all performances are double-scored, and that an appropriate system is in place to resolve score discrepancies. Rater reliability should also be higher than .8.

Reliability varies, however, along the score continuum. Tests usually have a score range where reliability is at its highest. Tests tend to be less reliable towards the extreme high and low score ranges. Reliability along this continuum of scores is indicated by the standard error of measurement (SEM), which indicates the margin of error around any score. The SEM should be particularly small around the entry score for university admissions. A small SEM can provide you with more confidence that students are correctly classified as those that are ready to enter your institution or those that need further study (**Refer to Guide 4: Setting English Language entry standards: What is language proficiency in a post-secondary setting?**). The statistic that provides information about the reliability around your cut-score, is the 'error of measurement'.

It is recommended institutions ask test providers for technical manuals in which this type of information is published.

☒	☒	DOES THE TEST DRAW ON AN APPROPRIATE SCORING SYSTEM FOR SPEAKING AND WRITING AND DOES THIS IMPACT THE TASK TYPES IN THE TEST?
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Language test providers draw on a variety of options when designing the scoring of spoken and written performances – performances are either scored by human assessors, by a computer, or by a combination of the two. There are advantages and disadvantages to using human assessors and automated scoring systems. Human raters are able to read or listen to a performance in an authentic way, as a reader or listener would in the real world situation. They are able to make judgements about the sophistication of a performance against pre-determined criteria. Unfortunately, however, human assessors,

even when well-trained, have been shown to not always agree on the scores they give, and it is therefore best practice to engage more than one assessor, and use a score resolution method if the two assessors arrive at different scores. Automated scoring systems have been shown to be more reliable than humans in assigning scores on specific, highly restrained dimensions, but these systems are unable to judge complex interactions or nuanced texts, and they cannot adapt, as humans can, to accents they have not been trained to recognise.

Some test providers therefore draw on a mixture of human and automated scoring, either across their test tasks, or for one test task.

Why? How?

On balance, institutions need to decide whether the scoring system used by the test provider will provide an adequate assessment of the written and spoken skills of a student for university entry. It is recommended that institutions look at the speaking and writing tasks included in the test, and find out how they are scored. Do these test tasks elicit sufficient speech or writing for students to show they will be able to cope at university? For example, if a writing task only requires short, less than 100 word responses, it is difficult to judge how well a test taker can write, especially at higher levels. If spoken ability is assessed by reading aloud, or by short responses, test takers may not be able to demonstrate what they could do when they are asked to, for example, participate in class discussions.

☒	☐	IS VALIDITY EVIDENCE IN THE FORM OF RESEARCH REPORTS AND TECHNICAL REPORTS READILY AVAILABLE?
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All test providers need to conduct studies to collect validity evidence for their tests. Ideally some of that research should be conducted by independent researchers, rather than just by in-house researchers. It is recommended that a list of available validation research is requested from the test provider, as well as technical reports when considering accepting a new test. Validity research could, for

example, focus on:

- Technical reports which set out score reliability, error of measurements, test taker numbers and scores in previous years of administration etc.
- Studies that have examined the relevance of the test tasks to the type of language use tasks students will encounter at university
- Studies that have examined the accuracy of the cut-scores
- Studies that have examined the reliability of the scoring mechanism
- Studies examining the impact and consequences of the use of the test.

☒	☐	DOES THE TEST HAVE APPROPRIATE SECURITY FEATURES?
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English language tests need to be secure for scores to be valid.

Why?

If test fraud occurs, clearly one can be less confident of a potential student's test score and their readiness for university study. There are a number of different types of test fraud:

1. alteration or fabrication of results
2. using someone else to take the test
3. receiving test questions or answers in advance or during the test, and
4. using unauthorized aids to assist with answering test questions.

On balance, institutions need to decide whether the scoring system used by the test provider will provide an adequate assessment of the written and spoken skills of a student for university entry.

Testing agencies rely on their reputation, so they take a variety of measures against test fraud. Larger testing agencies invest more in fraud prevention because they have the means to do so, but it is probably impossible to avoid all fraud. There is also not much published data on fraud cases. The following methods for detecting fraud have been used by test providers:

- Taking photos of test takers on the day.
- Randomly comparing handwriting between previously completed test papers and new samples.
- Biometric fingerprint scans or using voice ID software.
- Examining abnormal score activity/patterns.
- Banning candidates who have been identified as conducting fraud.

There are additional security features for in-home language tests, which is further described below in the section on in-home testing below.

How?

Test providers should be alerted to dramatically higher test scores in a short period of time (e.g., after 12 weeks of ESL lessons) or any other suspicions of test fraud. Scores should only be accepted directly from test providers.

☒	☐	WHERE RELEVANT, HAVE SCORE COMPARISONS TO OTHER ACCEPTED TESTS BEEN APPROPRIATELY CONDUCTED?
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Most institutions set minimum English language entry scores on English language tests not only for overall scores of the test, but also for some or all of the sub-test scores (e.g., reading, writing etc).

When accepting a new test, the standards on this new test need to be set to reflect the standards on previously accepted tests, to ensure that test takers entering on either test need to display a similar level of language proficiency to enter the university.

Why? How?

Please refer to the **Guide 5: Comparing scores on English language tests** where this topic is described in detail.

☒	☐	OTHER CRITERIA THAT MIGHT BE IMPORTANT TO CERTAIN INSTITUTIONS: • Availability/testing locations • test duration • fees/costs • accreditation by other external bodies, such as Department of Home Affairs and professional accreditation bodies
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There are a number of other criteria that may be worth investigating before a test is approved, including the availability of the test in terms of test centres, the test duration, and the fees for candidates. None of these pose particular validity risks in terms of score meaning, but they may result in inconvenience to test takers.

Checklist for selecting tests for university admission – criteria applicable to online tests (administered on testing agency premises)

☒	☐	IS THE SCORING ALGORITHM APPROPRIATELY MEASURING ACADEMIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY?
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More and more English language tests are moving onto online platforms to collect test performances. How the scoring happens, however, differs across test providers and tests. Some tests are fully automatically scored, and others use a mix of scoring methods across test tasks. When considering a new test for university entrance, it is recommended that institutions ask test providers for information about what the scoring algorithm is able to measure, and considering whether this information is sufficient to make decisions about university entrance.

Why? How?

Many automated scoring systems are still limited in their capabilities of what they can detect in students' written or spoken performances, and the focus is often on easily-detectable aspects, such as spelling, or simple grammatical errors, rather than broader discourse structures, organisation, argumentation, and so on. However, to be successful at university in writing, students need to do more than write with accurate grammar and with no spelling mistakes. They also need to be able to write longer, well organised texts, generate sufficient relevant ideas and plausible argumentation, etc. Unfortunately, many scoring algorithms are limited in how such higher level abilities are measured.

Institutions may also wish to ask whether mechanisms are in place to ensure students are not 'gaming' the test – a strategy sometimes used by test takers when responding to writing or speaking tasks that are automatically scored.

☒	☐	WAS THE TEST ORIGINALLY DEVELOPED AS AN ONLINE TEST?
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Some test providers have moved tests that were previously designed as pen and paper tests into the online environment (particularly to continue testing during COVID).

Why? How?

Changing the testing environment in such a way needs to be backed up by research to show that the change in test method (e.g., test takers having to type an essay rather than hand-writing the essay) does not significantly change score meaning. It may also be that some test taker groups are disadvantaged and others advantaged by such a change. Testing companies should be able to provide research reports that back up the move into the online environment and show that score meaning is not altered by the change.

Checklist for selecting tests for university admission – criteria applicable to online tests (administered at home)

☒	☐	ARE THERE APPROPRIATE SECURITY FEATURES IN PLACE TO SUPPORT AT-HOME TESTING?
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Why?

At-home tests add an additional level of security risk to those described in the section on 'Does the test have appropriate security features?'. Many of the risks described above essentially stay the same, in particular:

1. using someone else to take the test
2. having unauthorized aids, and
3. removing test questions or answers and passing these on to future test takers.

Testing agencies generally use proctoring services to combat these methods of cheating. Proctoring can take a variety of forms and it is valuable to request more information from the testing company about how this is handled in the case of a particular test. Proctoring can be either in-house (developed and owned by the testing company) or third party (developed and owned by a specialist proctoring service). It can involve human proctors (who watch what a candidate does), or drawing on artificial intelligence (AI) only (e.g., by flagging unusual movements of the test takers), or a mixture of both (e.g., AI flags unusual behaviour and a human reviews the recording). Please note that any form of proctoring involves some form of privacy invasion for test candidates, and the presence of a proctor may alter test taking behaviour for some candidates.

How?

Regardless of the type of proctoring that is used in at-home language testing, it is worth enquiring how learner identification at the beginning of the test is handled, how exam misconduct (e.g., through the unauthorized use of aids, such as dictionaries or translating software is handled), and how the export of test materials is handled.

Principles for English language test use in higher education admissions

Based on the checklist above, the following five principles could be used to form the basis for decisions about which English language tests to include in higher education English language requirements. Test providers may be asked to provide information in relation to the five principles.

Principle 1: The test is fit for purpose.

- The test measures academic English language proficiency.
- The tasks and scoring methods represent similar tasks, skills and values to those of the academic domain.
- The test provider has a validation agenda which examines the accuracy and appropriateness of scoring, the test's fit-for-purpose for the academic domain, and the impact of the test. The validation research is publicly available.
- The test generates preparation activities that develop academic English.

Principle 2: The test provides sufficient information for decision-making.

- The test measures four skills.
- The test levels are representative of the range of English language proficiencies relevant to the education institution's applicant pool.
- The Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) is acceptable at score decision points, i.e., the minimum required scores for entry to various programs.

Principle 3: The test provides consistent and fair measurement.

- The test is reliable and publishes information about its internal properties.
- The test is secure.
- The test is not biased against any applicant groups.

Principle 4: The test's score equivalence with other tests is robust.

- There is a sound empirical basis for the score equivalences claimed.
- Equivalences are based on considerations of construct congruence as well as correlational strength.

Principle 5: The range of tests accepted by an institution is accessible.

- At least one of the tests accepted by an institution is accessible in terms of technology, geography and any accommodations required for inclusive testing.
- In rare circumstances, exceptions may apply to Principles 1 to 4 for reasons of inclusivity and access.

4. Setting English language entry standards

The determination of how much language proficiency is enough for university entry, depends on a number of factors, including the degree of linguistic challenge of the relevant university degree courses and the availability of on-campus language support. Test takers do not pass or fail an English language proficiency test – they are awarded a score on a continuum and institutions decide where on that continuum to set their entrance requirements.

This guide explores how such minimum entry scores are set, what they represent and what other considerations need to be taken into account.

What do minimum entry standards on English language tests represent?

Most institutions set minimum English language entry scores on English language tests not only for overall scores of the test, but also for some or all of the sub-test scores (e.g., reading, writing etc). Many people misunderstand what these admission requirements represent and assume that this means that the incoming students will have a level of English language proficiency that is comparable to that of entering domestic students who grew up speaking English as their first language, and who have had all their schooling in English. Lecturers and other staff members, therefore, often think that these scores indicate readiness to participate fully in all university activities from the first day without the need for English language support or other ways of addressing their needs. They may start to question the validity of the tests.

In actual fact, entry scores (also referred to as cut-scores) represent the scores that a student whose English language proficiency is just enough to cope with the university English language requirements. They therefore represent the low end of a wide range of proficiency levels that students may have.

Please refer to **Guide 01: What is language proficiency in a post-secondary setting?** for a more detailed description of what English language proficiency scores measure (and what they do not).

Test providers often also provide some general guidance on possible minimum scores on their websites. For example, the following site provides information on the use of IELTS scores for different courses: <https://www.ielts.org/for-organisations/setting-ielts-entry-scores>.

In what ways are minimum entry standards typically set?

There is little to no information available on how universities decide on their minimum English language entry requirements. Anecdotal evidence suggests that universities often base their requirements on what other, similar institutions require and follow those decisions.

A more evidenced-based route, and the one recommended, would be to set minimum entrance requirements by convening a standard-setting workshop. In such a workshop, a group of representative key stakeholders from across the university (e.g., lecturers from different disciplines, language support personnel, associate deans – education) would review test materials for one representative English language test and decide, as a group, on the minimum performance level required. Such a session would be designed and facilitated by

someone with detailed knowledge of various possible standard-setting methodologies and would require access to test materials (and therefore support from the test provider). Some test providers offer such sessions at no cost.

Another way to support the setting of cut-scores empirically is by carefully examining the language requirements of specific courses by collecting examples of tasks required of students in the first year(s) of study and matching these to the test tasks (e.g., Golder, Reeder, & Fleming, 2011). While such an analysis may not provide information about where to set cut-scores, it might provide useful information about disciplinary demands (see next section below).

What other considerations are there when setting minimum entry standards?

There are some additional considerations when setting minimum entry requirements.

1. Rather than setting minimum entry requirements on overall test scores only, it is recommended that minimum requirements are set on all sub-test scores (reading, listening, writing, speaking) because different language skills are likely to have different importance for different courses.
2. Institutions may want to set different entry requirements for different disciplines, degrees or programs. These differences may be set due to different language demands in different disciplines (e.g., a greater demand on oral communication skills in some programs), and should also ideally be set empirically. The distinction between linguistically-demanding (e.g., arts programs) and less linguistically-demanding (e.g., STEM programs) courses sometimes found in the literature may also not be appropriate for the specific institutional curricula and contexts. While universities sometimes have different entry requirements for degrees that lead to professional registration (e.g., teaching, nursing), other courses are often not differentiated in the entry requirements (e.g., arts

and science). For this reason, it is recommended that entry scores are set empirically.

3. If a problem with English language is perceived at an institution, simply raising the minimum entry standard may not be a solution. This is because raising the minimum standards may exclude some very capable students from entry who may have other skills which compensate for any English challenges they face. The perceived problem may in fact occur because English language tests used for selection are somewhat limited in what they measure, and are not able to provide the full picture of a student's academic literacy or academic socialisation. The tests are designed to assess English language proficiency, and not academic or disciplinary literacies and skills (**Refer to Guide 1: What is language proficiency in a post-secondary setting?**). Other routes into university, such as pathway or EAP bridging programs, generally include components of academic skills and literacies in their courses which may not be measured by language proficiency tests (**Refer to Guide 6: Other evidence of language proficiency**). Refer also to **Guide 3: Selecting English language tests for entry**).

Specific recommendations are set out at the end of this document.

Setting entry scores on other/new tests

Once an institution has set minimum entry scores on a test, it may, from time to time, need to set equivalent standards on a new test that was not previously accepted. The Guide 05: Comparing scores on language tests provides details on how to do this.

Recommendations

1. When setting entry requirements, it is important not to rely too much on decisions made by other institutions, as the context and culture of different institutions are likely to differ greatly. It is recommended that each institution work towards a localized, evidenced-based policy by:
 - a. setting local cut-scores by drawing on established, principled standard-setting procedures
 - b. setting up routine procedures for monitoring relationships between initial proficiency scores and GPA (**Refer to Guide 2: What is the relationship between language proficiency and academic success?**)
 - c. considering the impact of raising and lowering cut-scores on academic outcomes
 - d. considering carefully how test scores from new tests can be compared to those established on other tests (**Refer to Guide 5: Comparing scores on language tests**).
2. When making decisions about minimum standards, it is important to become familiar with the information provided about any test that is accepted as evidence of meeting requirements. This includes familiarity with the descriptions of the different levels and the nature of the test itself. All major test providers provide sample tests and they should also provide sample performances at the different levels. If this information isn't available, it is recommended to request it from the provider.
3. Students entering with scores at or close to the minimum requirements are likely to require ongoing opportunities for English language development (**Refer to Guide 7: Post-entry language assessment** and **Guide 9: Providing ongoing feedback and support**).
4. Institutions perceiving a problem with their current minimum English language entry requirements should carefully examine whether there actually is a widespread problem, and if so, possible reasons (**Refer to Guide 1: What is language proficiency in post-secondary settings?**). It may be that the issues are more localized, e.g. with particular cohorts or disciplines, or the the perception of a problem is not borne out in the performance of students who entered with the minimum requirement. Simply increasing the minimum scores on English language proficiency tests may not solve the problem (and it may create others).

5. Comparing scores on language tests

It is important for institutions to be able to compare the scores from two or more different English language tests.

Why?

Students often present with different language proficiency qualifications which admissions officers may want to judge when making entry decisions. Similarly, from time to time, test providers request recognition of a new test product. For all these reasons, institutions may want to compare scores on two or more English language tests.

How?

Results on different English language tests are difficult to compare as they are not reported on the same scale. This means that there is no common reference ground to compare scores from different tests and set a cut-off for a new test that is similar to the cut-off on an existing test. As conducting standard-setting workshops (**Refer to Guide 4: Setting English language entry standards**) for multiple English language tests is costly and time-consuming, institutions need to find an alternative way to compare scores and set standards on more than one language test.

Score comparisons on different tests can only ever be tentative, since tests assess language in different ways and they describe test taker performance differently. Comparisons must be even more tentative between tests that are designed for different purposes and populations. Test users are often required to consider results from different tests, and for this reason test providers need to provide some guidance on how scores can be compared.

There are two methods to compare scores on language tests: scores can be compared by (1) using a language framework to which both tests have been linked, and/or (2) conducting a concordancing study which is designed to directly compare scores on two different tests. Each of these methods is described in more detail below.

Comparing scores using a language framework

One method of comparing test scores is through the use of language frameworks. Most major language tests are formally linked to language frameworks, in particular the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and through this, test 'equivalence' can be established. It is important to note that these are approximate, and not absolute equivalences. As mentioned, tests assess language in different ways and may be designed for different purposes yet they can still be deemed 'equivalent'. Institutions are advised to evaluate each test before accepting it as suitable evidence.

What are language frameworks?

Language frameworks are generalised descriptions of language learning progressions and are designed to assist comparison across language learning, teaching and assessment contexts. It is important to note that language frameworks are not language tests but rather a set of statements describing language abilities across levels which can be used by teachers, policy makers and test providers for various purposes. The most well-known example of a language framework is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) designed in Europe and published in the early 2000 (Council of Europe, 2001).

The CEFR comprises a series of levels of functional communicative language ability, expressing these in terms that are meaningful to users.

The CEFR scale makes distinctions between three broad learner levels, which are each further divided into the following levels:

A – basic: further subdivided into A.1 and A.2

B – independent: further subdivided into B.1 and B.2

C – proficient: further divided into C.1 and C.2

Figure 1 below presents the higher levels (B.1 to C.2) of the global scale in the CEFR, which are the most pertinent levels to university entry. Apart from the global scale, the CEFR includes more detailed descriptions for the various language skills, including reading, writing, speaking and listening. It is important to note that the CEFR is not a language test in itself, but just a general description of levels of learner proficiency.

The developers of the CEFR also published a manual outlining the procedures involved in linking language tests to the language framework (Council of Europe, 2009) and major test developers usually follow these (or similar) procedures.

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Figure 1: Extract – CEFR global scale

CEFR LEVEL	TOTAL (0–20)
C1 or above	95
B2	72
B1	42
A2	N/A

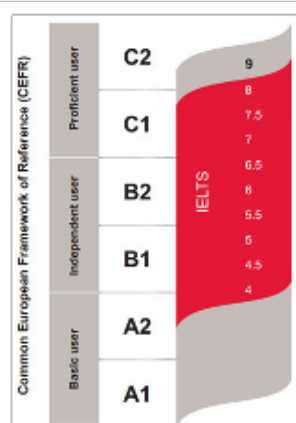


Figure 2: CEFR – IELTS comparison and CEFR – TOEFL iBT comparison

Figure 2 below, for example, presents the relationship of the IELTS test and the TOEFL iBT to the CEFR levels.

It can be seen from this figure that the IELTS band levels have been linked to the levels on the CEFR scale, with IELTS scores of 7, 7.5 and 8 falling into C1 level. The IELTS scale is thus finer in its gradations. Looking at the CEFR-TOEFL iBT comparison table on the right, it can be seen that one can, through the use of the CEFR, create rough comparisons between the IELTS and the TOEFL test. It is clear from the table, that these comparisons are relatively crude. For example, B1 might be at an IELTS level 4.5 and a TOEFL score of 42.

One problem with this method of test comparison is that it adds another layer to the comparison, in the sense that each test first needs to be linked to the CEFR, which is not developed for language for academic purposes. Language frameworks like the CEFR generally set out very generic language levels and are not aimed at academic contexts specifically. Comparing tests in this manner is an approximate and indirect way of making score comparisons.

Comparing scores on two tests by drawing on results of concordancing study

A more direct method of test comparison is through a concordancing study, a method in which the scores on the two tests are directly compared by having test takers take both tests. This more direct comparison should result in a more exact comparison of the scores of two tests, but the procedures to collect this data for each and every test comparison is time-consuming.

Concordancing studies vary widely in the methodology used and should be evaluated in terms of the study's sample (i.e., how many test takers took both tests? How were these participants selected?), how much time has elapsed between the two test sittings, how the test data was collected, and how it was analysed. Results of concordancing studies are always tentative, as can be seen by the differing results of the two IELTS-PTE Academic concordancing research (Clesham & Hughes, 2020; Elliot & Blackhurst, 2021) and score users will always be required to decide whether they accept the findings for use in their own institution.

One of the key results to look for in concordancing research is the correlation coefficient. This indicates how closely related the scores on the two tests are (or how similarly the test scores rank the test takers in terms of ability). If the correlation is not very strong (a strong correlation would be above .8), this indicates that test takers were ranked somewhat differently by the two tests, suggesting that the tests may be measuring different underlying abilities.

Low correlations also make the score comparisons reported as part of the linking study less robust.

Concordancing studies should also report a detailed account of the chosen methodology, including how many learners took both tests, whether the learners prepared for both tests equally (or are more likely to have prepared for only one of the two test sittings), which test participants took first (ideally half of the participants should have taken one test first and the other half the other test), the background of the learners (is the sample representative of learners who may typically enrol at your institution?), the interval between test sittings (anything longer than 3 months is likely to be too long), and whether there are sufficient participants at each of the relevant score levels used for entry. Concordancing studies should also report score equivalences for sub-tests, not only for the overall score.

Recommendations

1. When considering a new language test for university entrance, ask the test provider to supply information about any linking studies to language frameworks or concordancing studies that have been conducted.
2. Do not rely on equivalence tables alone as evidence that tests are measuring the same thing, or that an equivalent test is suitable for your institutional context. Consider the substance of each test in terms of how closely it aligns with your institutional context. Another way of thinking of this is how well the test is likely to prepare incoming students for the language demands of the academic context
3. Consider asking an experienced language tester to evaluate the methodology used and the results of the linking/concordancing studies.

6. Other evidence of English language proficiency for university entrance

Universities accept many different sources of evidence of English language proficiency for university entrance. English language tests are the most common, but other forms of evidence are diverse and include final year secondary qualifications including English subjects, university foundation studies, or successful completion of English language bridging/pathway programs.

This guide discusses two common types of non-test evidence of English language proficiency: (1) Evidence of successful completion of an English language pathway program, and (2) evidence of completion of an English language subject in a school-leaving certificate.

Evidence of successful completion of an English language bridging/pathway program

Many university English language centres offer direct entry pathway programs. Successful completion of such a program at a specified level will then be accepted as evidence of English language proficiency by the higher education institution. Quality assurance of such programs is becoming increasingly important to universities. While pathway programs are usually formally accredited (in Australia, e.g., through the National ELT Accreditation Scheme, or NEAS), individual universities must approve them for entry to their own undergraduate/postgraduate programs. Assessments used on exit of these pathway programs are usually designed in-house and often not transparent to university administrators. University decision-makers therefore often require the pathway providers to show that the assessments assess language proficiency at the same level as that accepted on English language tests (an issue discussed under point 4 below).

There are several key questions to consider in relation to these pathways and their assessments:

1. What expertise in assessment development and validation is available in-house by the provider of the pathway program? What quality assurance program is there in place to continually evaluate and validate the assessment program?

English language pathway providers vary vastly in terms of the expertise and training they have in-house in developing such assessments. When accrediting such direct entry programs, it is recommended that higher education institutions require detailed information about the assessments, particularly the end-of-course assessments, ask for information about the test development processes used, the trialling of assessment tasks, the statistical properties of the tests and how the results of various cohorts are evaluated.

2. What content is covered by the course and the assessments when compared with a language proficiency test?

Referring back to the basic model of language proficiency presented in the **Guide 1: What is language proficiency in post-secondary settings?** it is worthwhile examining what aspects pathway courses cover compared to large-scale English language proficiency tests, and whether it is appropriate to compare the two.

Pathway courses are designed to help students improve their general academic English proficiency, but also focus on skills generally not included in English language proficiency tests, such as study skills, note-

taking, oral presentation skills, understanding local referencing conventions etc. It could therefore be argued that pathway courses teach and assess more than 'just' English language proficiency.

The other issue is that assessments in the courses are designed to be achievement tests, that is, they are designed directly in alignments with course outcomes, whereas large-scale proficiency tests are developed to function outside of any specific course curricula.

Achievement tests reflect back on a past period of learning, whereas proficiency tests project forwards to predict what students will be able to do in the future. The value of each kind of test is different. If achievement tests reflect back on a period of learning that lays strong and relevant foundations for future study in a disciplinary context then they are likely to provide robust evidence for future success. If proficiency tests sample the kind of language that is closely aligned with the future academic context then it also has a greater likelihood of providing robust evidence for future success.

O'Loughlin and Bailey (2006) conducted a small-scale study comparing a small group of students who completed a pathway program, also took the IELTS test (for research purposes only) and then tracked these students into their university study. The research showed that many students did not achieve the required IELTS entry score, but once at university performed well in their study.

Such research shows that the mere comparison of pathway assessments with large-scale English language test scores does not make sense, and that more detailed tracking studies of students entering the university through such pathways may be more useful.

3. Is the pathway program likely to result in sufficient language development from admission to exit?

Pathway programs often require a specific English language proficiency score from students at entry, and then aim to increase that score to the required minimum for university entry during the course duration.

Many of the courses, however, are of relatively short duration (e.g., 10 to 12-week programs), and students may be unlikely to improve their language proficiency sufficiently in such a short period of time. Research on how quickly students can increase their language proficiency are divided on how much time it takes to make meaningful increases (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Green & Weir, 2003). What the research does show is that many factors (e.g., initial language proficiency, motivation, program attended) influence the progress made by students, and that students make varying progress on the four language skills during such courses. This is not to undermine the worth of pathway programs, but to say that student achievement in them is not straightforwardly mappable to proficiency tests score increases in 12-week intervals.

4. Should the direct entry pathway exit assessments be benchmarked against large-scale proficiency tests scores?

University policy-makers often require pathway providers to benchmark their assessments against well-known language proficiency tests. This is not without problems as (1) pathway assessments are designed to be achievement tests, and therefore reflect on a past period of learning, showing what students have learned of the specified curriculum and (2) pathway programs generally assess a broader set of skills than language proficiency tests (see point 2 above).

Pathway providers are at times required to benchmark their exit assessments to large-scale English language test scores. This can have unintended negative consequences – pathway providers may, as a result, design their learning objectives to be closer aligned with the large-scale proficiency tests. This carries the risk that such programs more and more resemble test preparation classes, rather than focussing more broadly on academic skills which students will benefit from once they enter university. One alternative may be to track pathway students once they have entered university to ascertain whether they are struggling in their course assessments in comparison to students who have entered on the basis of a language test score.

Recommendations

1. Establish pathway college's expertise in language assessment.

Before accrediting a direct entry program, it is recommended that a pathway provider's expertise in creating, validating and continually monitoring the direct assessments used in the course is established. This could include asking for any specific training on developing language assessments available by staff, a description of how the language assessments were developed and how they relate to the learning objectives, whether the test materials are trialled, and whether any analysis and validation activities are carried out. Institutions may also want to consider asking an expert in language assessment to review the assessment activities of the pathway provider.

2. Establish what the pathway curriculum is designed to assess (and compare to model of language proficiency described in **Guide 1: What is language proficiency in post-secondary settings?**).

It is recommended that the pathway provider is asked what aspects of language proficiency are taught and assessed in the courses – a review of the learning objectives will be helpful. Pathway courses focussing on broader skills than 'just' general academic language proficiency are likely to prepare students best for university study.

3. Track pathway students once at university and raise concerns about performance with pathway providers if required.

It is recommended that students entering through various pathways are tracked on an ongoing basis to establish whether any groups of students are experiencing challenges in their courses. This will show if particular cohorts of students entering particular disciplines are performing differently from other groups, and the information may help inform curriculum and assessment development in the pathway program. In this way, the effort to prepare students for academic study can be collaborative, rather than a detached monitoring system.

Evidence of successful completion of an English subject in a school-leaving certificate

From time to time, universities are asked to decide whether to accept successful completion of an English subject as part of a school leaving certificate as evidence of English language proficiency for entrance into higher education. It is important to note that such school leaving certificates are difficult to compare to results on large-scale English language tests, as what students are taught and assessed on in such courses may vary widely. For example, some English subjects may be designed to focus more on English language literature than teaching either general or academic English language proficiency. It is also not clear how much attention is given to the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) – it may well be that the focus is primarily on reading and writing at the expense of aural/oral skills. Some of the aspects contributing to course scores may not be related to English language proficiency at all, but rather to irrelevant aspects such as handing in assessments on time or attendance.

For this reason, it does not make sense to set score comparisons in relation to large-scale English language tests. It is, however, important to track students entering with such qualifications to ensure that they are coping with the English demands at university and offer support where necessary.

7. Post-entry (post-admission) language assessment

What is post-entry language assessment?

Student populations entering tertiary institutions are increasingly diverse. There are a number of reasons for this - institutions have vigorously recruited international students and domestic populations have also become increasingly multilingual due to migration flows.

The pathways these students use to enter are also diversifying, and the types of evidence that students need to provide to show their English language proficiency is not uniform in what it measures (**Refer to Guide 01: What is language proficiency in post-secondary settings?** and **Guide 6: Other evidence of language proficiency**).

For all these reasons, it cannot be assumed that students are equally equipped to cope with the language and literacy demands of degree studies. To deal with this issue, some institutions have developed local initiatives to assess their students after the students have been accepted (i.e., post-entry) to ensure that adequate support structures can be put in place to support their ongoing language development. These assessments do not have any bearing on the students' acceptance into the university but are designed to help students in their study journey by (1) identifying students who may be at risk early on, and (2) guiding them to appropriate support during their degree.

Data from a post-entry language assessment can be an essential component of a wider university strategy to improve the student experience and student outcomes, and it can inform quality assurance, student tracking studies, and feed into external audits.

How is post-entry assessment carried out?

The assessments and the policies implementing the assessments can vary along a number of different dimensions:

1. Overall function of assessment: Before creating a policy for an institutional post-entry language assessment, it is important to consider what its purpose will be – will it be used to diagnose language development needs and identify students eligible or required to take certain programs, or will it be used internally just to monitor student admission policies or for some other purpose?
2. Population: Institutions need to make a decision about whether all incoming new students or only specific student groups are required to take the assessment. It is also important to decide whether the post-entry language assessment policy will apply to new undergraduate students or to incoming post-graduates as well.
3. Mandatory: A decision will have to be made about whether the assessment will be mandatory for those students targeted by the institution with penalties for non-compliance or whether students will be encouraged to take the assessment without it being mandatory.
4. Assessment content: The institution needs to decide which skills will be targeted by the assessment: (1) will this focus on four language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) (2) which aspects of language proficiency described in the **Guide 1: What is language proficiency in post-secondary settings?** will the assessment target? – for example, general academic language proficiency, general language proficiency, academic literacy, other skills?
5. Assessment development: Institutions need to decide whether they will develop an assessment tool in-house or use a commercially available instrument.

6. Language development support and recommendations: Institutions need to decide what opportunities are available on campus for students to enhance their academic language or literacy. This may include English as a second language (ESL) credit courses, workshops run by academic skills units, individual support by academic skills, online resources, short courses, tutoring services, peer mentoring, etc. Decisions will need to be made about which students are 'at risk' and in need of support services, as well as the extent to which 'at-risk' students are required to take up support and how this will be monitored.
7. Timing & Administration: Decisions need to be made about questions around timing and administration: Will there be a fixed period when the assessment can be taken? Will students have to take the assessment in a supervised environment or can they take it at home?
8. Feedback: The feedback that is given based on the assessment can vary. Will students be given detailed feedback with recommendations on possible actions they need to take or be given a score and recommended follow-on courses/materials? This relates to the language development opportunities in point 6 above.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that a post-entry language assessment policy is carefully developed alongside an implementation plan to ensure maximum effectiveness. All decisions need to relate to creating maximum positive consequences for the students and the institution (Knoch & Elder, 2013).
2. It is recommended that the assessment content is linked to the support options available on campus so that students can be directed to suitable classes or other language learning opportunities that are most responsive to their needs.
3. It is recommended that all incoming students are included in the assessment process, regardless of their background and prior education to avoid any stigma for specific student groups.
4. It is recommended that an in-house instrument is only developed if the institution has existing language assessment expertise available.
5. It is recommended that if a post-entry language assessment is implemented, that the whole policy is regularly evaluated following the guidelines put forward by Knoch and Elder (2013) or similar.

8. English language development while studying in an English-medium setting

Understanding how much students' English language may develop while studying at an English-medium university is important when setting English language entry requirements and central to understanding what can be expected of students at exit.

Why?

Students often choose to study in an English-medium higher education setting because they anticipate that this will provide them with a rich exposure to English and a subsequent development of their English language proficiency. Despite this widely-held belief about the potential for English language development (which is also commonly held by university administrators, parents and other stakeholders), there is surprisingly little research investigating the effects of English-medium courses of instruction on language proficiency. Studies that have investigated this question (Gan, Stapleton, & Yang, 2015; Humphreys et al., 2012; Knoch, Rouhshad, Oon, & Storch, 2015; Knoch, Rouhshad, & Storch, 2014; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009; Storch & Hill, 2008) have differed in their methodologies with most investigating improvement over relatively short periods (e.g., one semester, one year) and not focussing on all four language skills.

Only one study (O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009) has investigated language development over a three-year period. Taken together, the studies show that improvements in language proficiency of students studying in English-medium higher education contexts are surprisingly small, or there were no gains at all. There is some evidence that students who enter at lower levels improve more, although even this finding is not consistent. A critical threshold seems to be IELTS 6 or 6.5 at entry, after which improvements seem to either not occur or to be very small. This is the level most commonly set for university entry in many contexts.

One of the limitations of such research is that the studies above have not measured development in discipline-specific language proficiency, the specialist language which they may acquire in their particular subject areas, (**Refer to Guide 1: What is language proficiency in post-secondary settings**) and may therefore not provide the full picture. Development in what was termed general or general academic language proficiency, however, seems rather limited. This may be because there are (a) few opportunities for interaction with native speaker students outside of the context of the classroom, (b) students' proficiency develops further in discipline-specific language rather than the sort of language measured in an English language test, or (c) simply that language development plateaus at this level and it takes many years of experience in the wider English medium culture and workplace to further develop.

Thus, the rather alarming finding that the English language proficiency of students might not develop or even decrease during their program of study points to the fact that English language tests are only an indication of whether a student is ready for the process of socialization into an academic discipline. They do not capture the particular content-based language learning that happens once the student is learning from within the discipline.

Studying online, particularly from overseas, is likely to result in diminished opportunities for English language development. The same is also the case for students studying online more generally. Studying online provides significantly fewer opportunities to communicate directly with others, either as part of course work (and especially outside of formal classes). It is therefore going to result in fewer language learning opportunities for English language learners, in particular. It is important to note, however, that a research base on language development when studying online is currently not available.

How?

Disciplinary language development of all students is the responsibility of university teaching staff in the first instance. Students from English as an additional language background may have different needs when learning disciplinary language. Additional support from other services on campus (Refer to Guide 09: Providing ongoing feedback and support) may be required, but the responsibility is on each particular discipline to support students adequately, regardless of their background.

Recommendation

1. To ensure ongoing language development after entry to higher education, it is recommended that universities build activities geared to ensure language development within mainstream courses with clear indications of expectations (e.g., within graduate attributes and learning outcomes) and various language hurdles that students are required to achieve on their course to graduation.

9. Providing ongoing feedback and support

Despite needing to show evidence of English language proficiency at entry, students may still encounter problems with English language and literacy demands at university.

Why?

English language entry requirements to higher education institutions represent the minimum language proficiency required to enter university study, and the tests that students take (and the scores they need to provide) do not capture all aspects of language needed in higher education (**Refer to Guide 1: What is language proficiency in higher education?**). Some students who meet or exceed the minimum proficiency requirements will nevertheless encounter difficulties. For this reason, it is recommended that institutions prepare a comprehensive policy on how students are to be supported throughout their degree program.

How?

There are several mechanisms for ongoing support available to institutions:

1. Post-entry language assessment

As described in the **Guide 7: Post-entry language assessment**, administering an institution-wide post-entry language assessment is one mechanism to identify students early on in their degree program and direct them to support available on campus. Having such a mechanism in place has the advantage that students can be supported from the beginning and are not only identified as requiring support after performing poorly due to the language demands of their subjects.

2. Language support options

It is recommended that institutions provide a comprehensive program of language and literacy support/enhancement to students, across all degrees and programs. Such programs are commonly developed by trained academic skills or English as a second language staff and may include English as a second language (ESL) credit

courses, workshops run by academic skills units, individual support by academic skills, online resources, short courses, tutoring services, peer mentoring or other options. Language support can be of a more general nature, e.g., a workshop on how to structure a literature review, or it can be discipline specific, e.g., a workshop on how to structure a lab report. Discipline-specific modules could be developed to support students in their disciplinary studies. Ideally, course offerings should be credit bearing so that there is no additional burden on students.

3. Consistent feedback on language use

It is recommended that an institution-wide, comprehensive feedback policy is developed that includes feedback on aspects of language use on all student work where this is feasible and relevant, and that a training program is offered to all teaching staff on how to provide this feedback. Such feedback should be provided for both spoken and written tasks across all study areas, regardless if these are graded and contribute to students' overall mark or are only used for formative feedback purposes. All courses could be required to offer at least one assignment where students need to produce sufficient language for feedback to be possible. Criteria across all courses should reference language and communication skills and should be directly linked to relevant graduate attributes that also focus on these skills.

It is also recommended that students are informed about where to seek further support if required and that academic staff are also familiar with the support services they can recommend to their students. In this way, students will understand expectations and the support available from the outset of their studies.

10. English language proficiency at the transition to the workplace

There are at times reports in the media or in reports from industry that graduates entering the workforce are ill-prepared for the language demands of their respective workplaces. This has led, in some contexts, (1) to concerns about the language proficiency entry standards into some courses, (2) to the criticism that universities are not adequately preparing students for the workforce, and (3) to calls for the introduction of a measure of language proficiency at the time students graduate from higher education which can be used by employers to screen students. This is known as ‘exit testing’.

Each of these points is further discussed below.

1. Concerns about language proficiency entry standards into courses

In the **Guide 4: Setting English language entry standards** considerations and methods for setting language entry requirements for university courses were discussed. It was noted that when setting entry requirements for certain courses that lead directly to professional registration with a certain industry body, the entry language requirements for that profession need to be considered to ensure that students do not reach the end of their degree study with insufficient proficiency for workplace entry.

Directly related to this issue is research examining how much students’ language proficiency may develop during their time studying at an English-medium university. This is discussed in the Guide 08: Language development while studying in more detail. For the purpose of this section, such development has been found to be limited.

2. Criticisms that universities are not preparing students for the work force

Criticisms that universities and other education providers are not adequately preparing students for the language demands of the work force have from time-to-time appeared in the media. Such claims are of course problematic, as workplaces and individual roles within these workplaces differ

greatly in terms of the demands they put on recent graduates. In addition, many university courses are not designed to prepare students for specific professions or occupations. Instead, they are training students in more generic, transferrable skills such as critical thinking, team work, problem solving, flexibility and adaptability.

3. Calls for introduction of an assessment of language proficiency at graduation

To ensure students are adequately prepared for the language demands of the workforce, policy makers in certain contexts (e.g., Berry & Lewkowicz, 2000) have called for the introduction of a language proficiency assessment around the time of exit from university. They have argued that the results could be used by potential employers to screen applicants, as well as holding universities accountable for developing students’ proficiency to an appropriate level. There are, however, several problems with this idea of ‘exit testing’:

- Exit tests are usually not designed to measure the specific disciplinary language proficiency students are likely to have acquired at university (it is far too costly and time-consuming to develop tests for each discipline). Rather, the tests that are used (such as IELTS or TOEFL) tend to focus on general or general academic language proficiency. This means that specific language skills that may be relevant to employers may not be measured.
- If the exit tests represent a hurdle requirement for graduation (rather than being an optional add-on), this may impact (and possibly narrow) the teaching curriculum.
- It is not entirely clear how much value such an assessment really brings to employers who may be interested in more specific competencies and skills that cannot be assessed by a generic English language assessment. Talented graduates might be disadvantaged by English language assessments and employers might miss out on the skills they seek.

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