

IELTS Research Reports Online Series

How are IELTS scores set and used for university admissions selection:
A cross-institutional case study



Daniel M. K. Lam, Anthony Green, Neil Murray and Angela Gayton

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This study set out to gain insights into how IELTS scores or other English language proficiency evidence are used in university admissions selection, and how minimum score requirements are set or changed. Taking a multiple case study approach, it aimed to explore and appreciate the contextual factors and practical considerations contributing to institutions' current practices, and to develop recommendations for good practice.

Funding

This research was funded by the IELTS Partners: British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia. Grant awarded 2018.

Publishing details

Published by the IELTS Partners: British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia © 2021.

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How to cite this report

Lam, D. M. K., Green, A., Murray, N., and Gayton, A. (2021.)
How are IELTS scores set and used for university admissions selection:
A cross-institutional case study, *IELTS Research Reports Online Series, No. 3*.
British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia.
Available at <https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/research-reports>

Introduction

This study by Lam, Green, Murray and Gayton was conducted with support from the IELTS partners (British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and Cambridge English Language Assessment), as part of the IELTS joint-funded research program. Research funded by the British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia under this program complement those conducted or commissioned by Cambridge English Language Assessment, and together inform the ongoing validation and improvement of IELTS.

A significant body of research has been produced since the joint-funded research program started in 1995, with over 130 empirical studies receiving grant funding. After undergoing a process of peer review and revision, many of the studies have been published in academic journals, in several IELTS-focused volumes in the *Studies in Language Testing series* (www.cambridgeenglish.org/silt), and in the *IELTS Research Reports*. Since 2012, to facilitate timely access, individual research reports have been made available on the IELTS website immediately after completing the peer review and revision process.

The importance of setting minimum language requirements for students entering university cannot be underestimated. Incorrect decisions based on test results can have a serious impact on students' lives: some applicants may be excluded from entering a university while others may be accepted but may struggle due to insufficient language proficiency. Setting minimum entrance requirements has consequently long been a challenging task for university admissions departments. Previous research has found that test scores are used either as the only evidence or in combination with other forms of evidence to meet the English language proficiency requirement for admissions (Banerjee, 2003; Lloyd-Jones et al., 2012; O'Loughlin, 2011). In the latter case, there is a question about how institutions use the various forms of evidence to set entrance requirements. This study aims to investigate this question by considering how IELTS scores and other evidence of language proficiency are used for admissions decisions in different contexts, and how minimum IELTS scores are set and amended. In contrast with other studies carried out in this area, which have focused on different programs within a single institution, this study employs a multiple case study approach involving six different admissions contexts in five universities.

The data, collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, considered the level of decision-making (pre-sessional, departmental, institutional program), the level of study (pre-sessional, undergraduate, postgraduate) and the type of university (Russell Group, Post-1992, 1994 Group). The data was then coded and summarised into four themes, which were then discussed by an expert panel comprising the four researchers and three representatives of the IELTS partners.

The results provide interesting insights into the role of test scores, with the admissions staff in the study prioritising test scores over other forms of evidence. While other forms of evidence such as applicants' writing or referee evaluations were sometimes taken into account, the findings suggest this was more likely to be the case at postgraduate level,

or before applicants' test scores become available. Expert panel members endorsed this use of different forms of evidence, positing that the more evidence there is available, the better the picture of the applicant's proficiency.

Guiding principles in relation to the use of language proficiency evidence were found to include fairness, transparency and trustworthiness of the evidence, whereby IELTS scores were found to be a trusted form of evidence.

When setting entrance requirements, the results reveal that there are processes for approval but no formal standard-setting exercises. The lack of understanding of standard-setting processes among respondents highlights the gap between policy-makers and those who have to implement the decisions. The results also shed light on the basis on which entrance requirements are reviewed. These include tracking students' progress, student recruitment targets, and comparison with competitor and/or benchmark institutions.

The study also makes a number of recommendations for good practice. One of these is that admissions officers and receiving organisations should understand what IELTS does, and does not, assess and what IELTS scores mean in terms of actual performance. The authors recommend reflecting critically on how to set minimum English language requirements and exercising caution when interpreting language test scores. In light of the fact that IELTS tests English for General Academic Purposes, they stress the need for students to be provided with support to develop academic literacy in their particular disciplines.

The report ends with a call for more research into the area of test scores and the use of other evidence while at the same time urging the IELTS partners to tailor guidance materials to score users such as admissions officers and EAP staff. The authors further recommend providing training to admissions officers and formal recognition of standard-setting exercises.

This report provides valuable food for thought for the IELTS partners when communicating with stakeholders regarding the use of test scores for university admissions purposes. It will also be of interest to a large number of stakeholders including, but not limited to, admissions officers, EAP practitioners, testing organisation staff involved in client relations with receiving organisations, and marketing staff from testing organisations.

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How are IELTS scores set and used for university admissions selection: A cross-institutional case study

Abstract

For test scores from standardised language proficiency tests, the various aspects of validity can be established through rigorous test design, delivery and scoring procedures. Whether and how the resulting test scores are judiciously interpreted and used in institutional decision-making is at least as important as other aspects of validity, yet the most difficult to ascertain within the test provider's remit.

This study set out to gain insights into how IELTS scores or other English language proficiency evidence are used in university admissions selection, and how minimum score requirements are set or changed. Taking a multiple case study approach, it aimed to explore and appreciate the contextual factors and practical considerations contributing to institutions' current practices, and to develop recommendations for good practice.

Six different admissions contexts were sampled according to level of decision-making, level of study, and type of university. A case study was constructed for each admissions context based on an in-depth interview with a relevant staff member – an admissions officer, a program director, or a pre-sessional program coordinator, supplemented by published information on the institution's website. Salient themes and findings from the case studies were critically examined in a panel discussion comprising the research team and three IELTS partners representatives.

Regarding the use of test scores and other proficiency evidence, it was found that IELTS scores are used and trusted as a default form of evidence to satisfy the English language requirement for admission. A more holistic approach that takes account of other forms of evidence is adopted in postgraduate admissions contexts and in cases with borderline test scores. Trustworthiness of the evidence, as well as fairness and transparency, were identified as guiding principles for the current practices, while the prioritising of practicality and efficiency have supported the use of test scores as sole evidence and somewhat discouraged the use of multiple forms of proficiency evidence.

With reference to setting and changing minimum score requirements, the case studies suggested that existing practices involve discussion and approval processes through multiple layers of decision-making entities, but not formal standard-setting exercises. Changes to the minimum requirements are often motivated by recruitment considerations, benchmarked against rival institutions or neighbouring departments, but with limited engagement with guidance from IELTS.

Based on the findings from the case studies and the panel discussion, we provide some recommendations for good practice in test score use in university admissions selection, and offer some suggestions to the IELTS partners for further engagement with score users.

List of Abbreviations	
BALEAP	British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EGAP	English for General Academic Purposes
ESAP	English for Specific Academic Purposes
HE	Higher Education
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
PELA	Post-Enrolment Language Assessment
PG	Postgraduate
SELT	Secure English Language Test
UG	Undergraduate

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1 Rationale

Recent years have seen growing attention to the consequences of test score use (Messick, 1989; Kane, 2013), and this has increasingly become a focus for language assessment research. Responding to this development, the IELTS partners have set out to examine and improve the impact of the test on its stakeholders in various contexts (Saville & Hawkey, 2004; Hawkey, 2011).

Within the domain of IELTS test score use for academic purposes, research on predictive validity conducted in the 1990s (e.g., Elder, 1993; Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Dooley & Oliver, 2002) produced findings that were notably ambiguous, and in cases where correlations were found to exist between language proficiency test scores and subsequent academic success, these were generally modest. The discussion that followed yielded a more sophisticated understanding of the multitude of factors that could influence students' academic performance (see Murray, 2016).

One line of research has focused on the perceptions of university staff concerning the relationship between proficiency test scores and academic (language) performance (e.g., Coleman, Starfield & Hagan, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2004; Hyatt, 2013). While these studies have been helpful in identifying gaps in knowledge about test score interpretation and use among staff at receiving institutions, studies focusing on the role of IELTS in the practice of university admissions selection decision-making are few and far between (Banerjee, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2008/2011; Lloyd-Jones, Neame & Medaney, 2012). It is of practical and theoretical significance to examine and evaluate the setting of score requirements by universities and the use of scores in making decisions on admissions.

1.1 How test scores are used

Among the few studies which examined the use of IELTS scores in university admissions selection (Banerjee, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2008/2011; Lloyd-Jones, Neame & Medaney, 2012), two main approaches to IELTS score use have been identified. The test score is either used in 'checklist' fashion, contributing directly to an 'accept', 'conditional offer', or 'reject' decision; or it is used in conjunction with other criteria in a more complex decision-making process that involves balancing different sources of evidence to arrive at a judgement on the suitability of a prospective student.

The study by O'Loughlin (2008/2011) conducted at an Australian university identified the use of the first approach, which he criticises as "a rigid and lockstep approach" which "places too much reliance on the applicant's academic record and a single piece of English proficiency evidence" (2011, p. 153). He problematises such an approach to selection as not "allow[ing] for IELTS scores to be considered in relation to other relevant individual factors" as recommended in the *IELTS Handbook* (ibid.). In other words, this algorithmic approach to decision-making would seem to overvalue the predictive power of the test.

Banerjee (2003) and Lloyd-Jones et al. (2012) investigated postgraduate admissions at UK universities. Both noted the use of complementary forms of language proficiency evidence in addition to IELTS scores (such as interview, essays, and correspondence with the student). Researchers have favoured this more holistic approach on the grounds that it is the preferred approach among administrative staff (O'Loughlin, 2011); is implied in the *IELTS Handbook* (ibid.); and seems to more effectively identify students with potentially inadequate language skills to cope with the academic program (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2012).



Of course, the holistic, complex decision-making approach is not without its challenges (see O'Loughlin, 2011). It remains a theoretical and empirical question as to how other forms of language proficiency evidence are, or should be, taken into account, and whether there are methodical ways of bringing the evidence together to arrive at a defensible decision. In concluding a later survey study on university staff's assessment literacy, O'Loughlin (2013) called for more research on how such an approach is adopted in UK and US universities, "to provide the IELTS partners with models of good practice" (p. 377). The current study responds to this call by investigating how admissions staff use test scores and other forms of language proficiency evidence in different admissions contexts.

1.2 How the minimum score is set

Developing "models of good practice" would also be beneficial when it comes to determining minimum score requirements for different levels of study or disciplines. Some of the previous predictive validity studies were motivated by the need to establish the appropriate minimum score requirement for a specific discipline or program. Since that time, the IELTS Partners have provided support for standard-setting efforts through the *IELTS Scores Guide*¹ package of sample test materials and benchmark performances. However, little research attention has been given to how academic institutions (and individual study programmes) actually set their minimum language proficiency requirements.

Among the few studies that have touched upon this question, Banerjee (2003) found that the university's minimum score requirement was set on the expert advice of a senior EAP staff member. O'Loughlin (2011) argues that, in the Australian university in his study, there was "no principled basis for originally establishing IELTS minimum entry scores" (p. 158) – it was based on "a shared sense" across Australian universities and "prevailing market forces" rather than formal standard-setting procedures (p.151), largely because of keen competition for full-fee-paying international students. This is in line with the charge made in the internationalisation literature that beneath its purported aim of "reciprocal exchanges of national culture and ideas" (Jiang, 2008, p.348) often lie agendas propelled by economic forces (Jiang, 2008; Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Guo & Chase, 2011), with host universities' recruitment of international students mainly motivated by "revenue generation" (Iannelli & Huang, 2014, p.807). Indeed, several researchers in the test score use literature have also noted the tension between standard-setting (which relates to reputation, teaching load, and quality of the study programs) and the economic imperative to recruit international students in the UK and Australian university contexts (Ingram & Bayliss, 2007; O'Loughlin, 2013; Hyatt, 2013; Murray, 2016; Thorpe, Snell, Davey-Evans & Talman, 2017).

On issues around how language proficiency test scores are to be used for university admissions and how minimum score requirements are to be set, there are guidelines offered by test providers and professional organisations. Notable ones include the *IELTS Guide for Education Institutions, Governments, Professional Bodies and Commercial Organisations* (2019), published by the IELTS Partners; and the *BALEAP Guidelines on English Language Tests for University Entry* (BALEAP, 2020²), published by the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes. These guidance documents offer recommendations for how to (and how not to) set minimum score requirements, standard-setting procedures and committee membership, and tracking students' academic progress as the basis for adjusting minimum scores. Regarding the use of test scores in admissions decision-making, IELTS provide a package of sample test materials and benchmark performances (*IELTS Scores Guide*) to help receiving institutions understand the meaning of the score bands. The BALEAP guidelines discuss considerations for receiving institutions in selecting tests accepted for entry, and provide a description and evaluation of a range of English language proficiency tests.

1. Formerly titled *IELTS Scores Explained*.

2. Note that, while the updated version published in 2020 is referenced here, the guidance document was first compiled c. 2007.

Echoing calls for more research on student recruitment procedures and the role of language proficiency in both the test score use literature (e.g., Lloyd-Jones et al., 2012; O'Loughlin, 2013) and the internationalisation literature (e.g., Iannelli & Huang, 2014), this study explores how universities' student recruitment priorities may interact with the ways test scores (and other forms of language proficiency evidence) are used in admissions decision-making, and the ways minimum language proficiency requirements are set.

2 Research questions

This study addresses the following two research questions. The study is also guided by the specific questions under each of RQ1 and RQ2, based on the issues identified in the literature reviewed above, while allowing other salient themes to emerge in the process of data collection and analysis.

RQ1. How are IELTS³ score(s) used in admissions selection in the UK universities sampled in this study?

- At what stage of the admissions decision-making process are the scores used?
- Are the scores used as the sole form of evidence or together with others?
- Are the sub-scores (score bands for the four skills) used in the decision-making process together with the overall IELTS score?
- Are other forms of language proficiency evidence taken into account? If so, how?
- What factors contribute to the adoption of particular selection models (e.g., size of program, number of applications, experience of admissions personnel)? (cf. Banerjee, 2003)
- Does the internationalisation agenda influence the ways in which universities use IELTS scores in admissions selection? (cf. O'Loughlin, 2011; Iannelli & Huang, 2014)
- Has the selection model been reviewed or changed over the years?
- What are considered 'good practices' in test score use in admissions selection?

RQ2. How are minimum IELTS score(s) set as part of admission requirements in the UK universities sampled in this study?

- At what decision-making level(s) are minimum scores determined (university, school/faculty, program)?
- What is the decision-making process used for setting the minimum IELTS score(s)?
- What are the bases for setting minimum score(s) (e.g., standard-setting exercise, expert advice, benchmarking against competing universities)?
- To what extent is IELTS guidance consulted and applied?
- Does the internationalisation agenda influence the ways in which universities set IELTS scores for admission?
- Are the minimum score requirements monitored and reviewed? (cf. O'Loughlin, 2011) If so, how often are the minimum score(s) changed?

3. IELTS scores and/or other language proficiency tests.

3 Research design

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of how IELTS scores are set and used in universities' admission decision-making processes, the underlying rationale and the local conditions contributing to the selection model and practices, this study takes a multiple case study approach. While a considerable number of (survey) studies have been conducted looking at staff knowledge and attitudes (e.g., Coleman et al., 2003; Rea-Dickins, Kiely and Yu, 2007; O'Loughlin, 2013; Hyatt, 2013), few studies examine admissions selection practices. The available studies identified in the literature review (Banerjee, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2008/2011; Lloyd-Jones et al., 2012) all adopted a case study approach, and the value of further research taking a similar approach is reflected in the Lloyd-Jones et al.'s (2012) observation that:

"[The] findings [about which selection model and why] require further confirmation through comparative research in different settings. In particular, probing what factors and circumstances selection personnel consider when deciding whether or not to offer a candidate a place." [sic] (p.10)

Note also that the three studies cited above have all focused on a single institution (but two or more study programs). This study aims to broaden the scope of investigation through multiple case studies of different institutions and decision-making levels (institutional vs. program/departmental level).

The purpose of this study is to explore different practices in setting and using IELTS scores in admissions selection, and themes as well as lines of inquiry are expected to emerge and develop as the study unfolds. Therefore, following Lloyd-Jones et al. (2012), an inductive flexible research design has been adopted whereby findings at earlier stages of the study will inform the lines of inquiry and data collection at later stages.

3.1 Sampling

This study sampled six admissions contexts⁴ in five UK universities. Table 1 shows the characteristics of each context, and the role of the informant we interviewed.

4. We originally had yet another admissions context from a sixth university (institutional decision-making level for postgraduate study at a Russell Group university). Unfortunately, the informant TSU07 withdrew due to circumstances related to COVID-19.

5. (Table 1 note) Informants TSU01-E (Case Study E) and TSU02-A (Case Study A) are from the same university.

Table 1: Characteristics of the admissions contexts in the case studies

Case study	Type of university	Decision-making level	Department	Level of study	Personnel
A	Post-1992	Institutional	Admissions / recruitment	UG, PG (taught), pre-sessional	Recruitment officer (formerly international admissions officer) ID: TSU02-A
B	Post-1992	Institutional	Admissions / recruitment	UG, taught PG, research PG	Admissions officer (former) ID: TSU06-B
C	Russell Group	Departmental	Academic (social sciences)	PG (taught and research)	Admissions officer (administrative) ID: TSU04-C
D	Russell Group	Departmental	Academic (education)	PG (taught)	Program director (academic, former) ID: TSU05-D
E	Post-1992	Pre-sessional program	Language centre	Pre-sessional English	EAP coordinator ID: TSU01-E ⁵
F	1994 Group	Pre-sessional program	Language centre	Pre-sessional English	EAP coordinator ID: TSU03-F



Thus, we collected data for case studies with a range of contextual characteristics:

- level of decision-making – institutional, departmental, pre-sessional program
- level of study – undergraduate, postgraduate, pre-sessional
- type of university – 1994 Group, Post-1992, Russell Group.

Such a sampling strategy may afford us a more holistic picture of how IELTS scores are set and used for admissions selection.

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Initial contact and the designing of the interview questions

The research team made initial contact with potential participants by email, outlining the aims of the research and the reason why they were invited to participate. After an interview was confirmed and scheduled, a document analysis of the respective university website was conducted to gather publicly available information about the admissions context, such as:

- the minimum IELTS or other language test scores (university-wide requirements; or requirements for the specific academic / pre-sessional programs)
- any minimum sub-score requirements (for the four language skills)
- any alternative pathways used to meet language proficiency conditions.

While the sub-questions under RQ1 and RQ2 served as an overall framework for the schedule adopted for each interview, the interview questions were adapted according to each specific admissions context. The results of the website search also informed the formulation of additional (follow-up) questions relevant to the specific contexts.

For example:

- To what extent does the decision to waive a language test score follow a rigid set of criteria, or is the decision made on a case-by-case basis?
- For the correspondence between a particular test score and the number of weeks on the pre-sessional English program (e.g., a student with IELTS 5.0 is admitted to a 24-week pre-sessional program) – Who determined this? What formed the basis of such correspondence?

The interview schedule (see Appendix A for a sample) also evolved as part of an iterative process – the wording of some interview questions was modified in later interviews where informants in earlier interviews showed difficulty in understanding the questions.

Each informant was sent the general interview topics to preview at least three days before the interview.

3.2.2 Interviews with admissions personnel

All six interviews were face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted by DL, with AG attending the interview with TSU05-D as a note-taker. They all took place in a meeting room at the university where the informants work. Each interview began with the researcher giving a brief description of the study's aims and scope, and signing of the informed consent form (see Appendix B). The informant was asked to describe their role in relation to admissions selection, and the interview proceeded with questions on the interview schedule. The semi-structured format of the interview allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions or alter the order of questions based on the participant's responses, but efforts were made to ensure all areas on the interview schedule were covered. All interviews lasted approximately one hour, and were audio-recorded.



The interviews for the different admission contexts were strategically scheduled to take place at different stages, such that interviews at later stages could be informed by experiences in the earlier interviews. Drawing on informants' responses and preliminary findings from earlier interviews, modifications to the wording of some questions, as well as some additional questions, were incorporated in the later interviews. For example, in earlier interviews, the informants were asked to reflect on possible explanations (e.g., cohort size, fairness) for the way test scores were used as the sole form of proficiency evidence or as part of a holistic evaluation.

Original:

*Why do you think **this particular selection method** (in terms of using language proficiency evidence) is used? What factors do you think are relevant?*

Revised:

*What do you think might be the **reasons for the practices/procedures described above** (in terms of using language proficiency evidence)? What factors do you think are relevant?*

The original wording "selection method" presented difficulty in understanding by our informants and was revised to "practices/procedures described above". The revised version makes reference to the procedure of screening applications and practices in using test scores (e.g., leeway with sub-scores, use of other proficiency evidence) they have just described in answer to previous questions, so they know what they are being asked to provide reasons for.

Another question with revised wording was one on the role of internationalisation on the way test scores or other language proficiency evidence are used in admissions selection.

Original:

*Does the **agenda of internationalisation** play a role in the ways language proficiency evidence is used (in admissions selection in your context)?*

Revised:

*Do **considerations of student recruitment** (or an internationalisation agenda) play a role in the ways language proficiency evidence is used in your context?*

[follow-up where relevant: e.g., recruitment targets for specific countries, with particular score profile patterns]

As informants in earlier interviews almost invariably asked to clarify the meaning of "internationalisation agenda", and the subsequent answers referred to issues around student numbers and recruitment targets, the question was revised for later interviews to discuss these issues directly, along with optional examples for follow-up based on responses in earlier interviews.

3.3 Data processing and analysis

The audio recordings for the six interviews were reviewed by either AG or DL, and detailed notes were made for each. Verbatim transcription is done where participants' interview responses are quoted in reports. To facilitate data management and organisation, all detailed notes of participants' responses were stored on NVivo 12. They underwent initial deductive coding (see Appendix C for the coding scheme), allowing participants' responses to be organised by preliminary themes around which the interviews were based. This was particularly useful in cases where (parts of) a participant's answer to a question was relevant to one or more other questions.



The data were then coded inductively to allow themes to emerge, with the researchers' interpretation added as annotations and memo notes on NVivo 12. The main object of the analysis was to describe the practices employed in the setting and using of language test scores and other language proficiency evidence in relation to the institutional context of each case.

The interview with TSU04-C was double coded by DL and AG following the coding scheme (Appendix C). The two researchers then had a discussion to address and resolve discrepancies, to allow coding of the rest of the dataset individually by DL or AG, while ensuring consistency in organising responses according to themes for subsequent analysis.

3.4 Panel discussion

Following the case studies of the six admissions contexts, we conducted a panel discussion, where the findings from the case studies were summarised and critically examined, with a view to gaining an understanding of how IELTS scores are used and interpreted by admissions staff in various contexts, and considering ways forward in further engagement with test score users. Participants consisted of all four members of the research team (F01–F04), representing expertise in university admissions selection, language assessment, standard setting, and internationalisation of higher education; as well as three representatives from the IELTS Partners (F05–F07), who have roles in engaging with test score users, such as offering training seminars and guidance on standard-setting.

Four salient themes from the case studies were selected for the panel discussion, namely:

1. Test scores and other forms of language proficiency evidence: Trustworthiness and use
2. Using test scores and setting proficiency requirements: Are practices in line with IELTS partners' intended/recommended score use?
3. Using test scores and setting proficiency requirements: Relationship between admissions and recruitment
4. Engaging with test score users: Support for admissions staff from IELTS Partners.

Summaries of the six case studies and the relevant interview responses were sent to the panel discussion participants to preview before the session.

The panel discussion took place online via Microsoft Teams video-conferencing facility – the original plan for a face-to-face panel discussion changed due to COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. DL facilitated the session: For each of the four themes, DL summarised salient findings and examples from the case studies. The panel members then freely discussed their views from their respective expertise and experience. The session lasted approximately two hours, and was audio- and video-recorded.

Following the session, the audio recording was transcribed, and a summary of key points raised by different panel members under each theme was produced. Similarities and differences between the views of panel members and those of the informants from the case studies were noted and integrated into the discussion of overall themes (see Section 10).

In the following sections (Sections 4–9)⁶, we present the case studies of the six admissions contexts, beginning with the institutional/central admissions contexts (Case Studies A and B), followed by the departmental contexts (Case Studies C and D), and finally the pre-sessional EAP contexts (Case Studies E and F).

6. For readers who wish to have an overview of the common themes and overall findings across the case studies, it might be useful to read Section 10 – Discussion, before selecting individual case studies of interest to read in detail. The table of contents is hyperlinked to individual sections and pages.

4. Case study A

4.0 Admissions context

The context of this case study is international student admissions for undergraduate and taught postgraduate degree programs, as well as pre-sessional programs, at a Post-1992 group university. The informant (TSU02-A) has had a recent role as international admissions officer, and a current role as student recruitment officer. According to the informant, her current role relates closely to admissions through gathering market information (e.g. intelligence on particular qualifications) that feeds back to the setting of admissions criteria for particular markets of international students, as well as contributing a second opinion for admissions decisions.

4.1 Admissions selection process and use of test scores

Generally, the selection process involves screening large numbers of applications by admissions officers, who check the evidence (the applicants' qualifications) against the admission criteria. They would first check the applicant's academic qualifications, then their English language proficiency evidence, and on the basis of the evidence available, make a decision. As with the admissions contexts in the other case studies, it is not a requirement for applicants to supply language proficiency evidence at the point of application. The language proficiency requirement can be met after being given a conditional offer of admission. According to the informant, the admissions officers in this context would find out what tests or exams the applicant has taken and advise them on what they need to meet the admissions requirements, for example, a Secure English Language Test (SELT) as part of the visa requirements if it is an application to a foundation or pre-sessional program.

For IELTS scores, the university requires applicants to undergraduate programs to achieve an overall score of 6.0, with minimum 6.0 in Reading and Writing, and 5.5 in Listening and Speaking. There are higher minimum score requirements for some disciplines, and the minimum overall score is between 6.0–7.0 for postgraduate programs. The sub-score requirements, according to the informant, reflects a degree of flexibility the university provides for prospective students. However, they would not accept any sub-score below 5.5 for admission to degree programs, as that would not meet the UKVI requirement of CEFR B2 level.

"We naturally would prioritise writing and reading. So normally in our office anyway, the scores we look for in Writing and Reading are slightly higher. So normally that would be 6.0, whereas the other will be 5.5. So if we're talking about having flexibility, we are able to be a bit more flexible on Listening and Speaking. But that being said, because a lot of our courses are IELTS 6, and the minimum requirement from the UKVI perspective is, you know, B2, so consider that 5.5 marker. We can't actually consider anything lower than 5.5...Because it's below that B2 5.5, we wouldn't be able to then consider that one. So there is a baseline."

A further aspect of flexibility with sub-scores is that, although reading and writing are skills that the university "prioritise" in terms of requiring a higher sub-score of 6.0, they would often accept 5.5 in Reading if the overall score meets the minimum requirement, and that is also when other language proficiency evidence would be considered together with the test scores (see Section 2 below).

"There is some flexibility. So, first of all, if we're talking for example, say, a course that requires IELTS 6.0, and it'll be 6 in Reading and Writing, 5.5 in Listening and Speaking. If a student has 5.5 in Reading as well, and they've got 6.0 overall, a lot of the time we can be flexible on that. So we can just make a decision or the admissions team will make a decision and say that's fine. Okay, we'll accept that."



Overall, the informant characterised their institution's approach to admissions selection as flexible, holistic, with an orientation towards a positive outcome:

"I think I would say as an admissions team as a whole, we tend to look at applications in a very holistic way. So we don't isolate, you know, one part of the other. Yes, we are looking to tick boxes in some senses and say, yes, they've got this qualification. They've got the English, They've got whatever references. But, we are looking for, on the whole, looking for reasons to say yes to the students. So we're looking for things that we can use as evidence. But yes, most cases, I would say it is quite rare that we would be turning somebody away because they're very slightly out. If we are in that case, it's not really a yes/no answer. It's more, *yes, we'll make you an offer but you need to retake IELTS*, or normally the phrasing would be *IELTS or a pre-sessional course*."

As the informant explained, the admissions staff would actively look for evidence in the application, and ask prospective students to supply additional evidence, thereby working towards making an offer of admission as the outcome. In cases where the applicant cannot meet the requirement at one stage, they would encourage the applicant to work towards meeting the requirement (e.g., retake IELTS) or offer them a pre-sessional course.

Synthesising the informant's discussion, a number of factors have been found to mediate the institution's exercise of flexibility in evaluating prospective students' language proficiency evidence. First and foremost, such flexibility in evaluating test scores against entry criteria, and the holistic approach that considers additional or alternative proficiency evidence, is likely to be motivated by student recruitment (see Section 4). On the other hand, flexibility is moderated by visa requirements vis-a-vis the prospective students' country of origin, as well as the discipline of study (i.e. some degree programs require higher minimum scores):

"Normally we look for the official evidence first, which will be the test score results. There's only a certain degree of flexibility particularly when you're talking about a Tier 4 student. If it's a student with the European passport, as things currently stand, there's some flexibility in being able to consider other methods, but usually that does vary case-by-case, that we might consider something completely different from what we would normally ask."

"But probably if they've got 0.5 down in both skills, then we're not, you know, we might have a few concerns. More just for their own benefit, you know how they're going to be able to succeed on the course."

The degree of flexibility is 0.5 in the sub-scores (the scores for each of the four skills), although, as seen above, they would not accept sub-scores below 5.5 (CEFR B2), or two sub-scores falling 0.5 band short.

4.2 Use of test scores and other proficiency evidence

The types of English language proficiency evidence other than test scores that might be taken into account in admissions decision-making include: English-medium qualifications (high school, university degree), the personal statement, and work experience from the applicant's CV. According to the informant, these kinds of evidence can be considered together with the test scores orienting towards both negative outcomes – when there are "warning signs" in the application – and positive outcomes – e.g., in borderline cases where an IELTS sub-score falls short 0.5 a band.



"I think, as a general rule, we would encourage flexibility in all cases. I think the occasions when there wouldn't be flexibility might be if there were kind of warning signs in the application. So it seemed that the student was particularly low level academically as well as language-wise, and there were concerns there, in which case maybe a [pre-sessional] course might be offered as consideration. Often there's evidence outside of just the IELTS certificate or whatever."

As with admissions staff in other case studies, the informant was aware of the disputable trustworthiness of the personal statement as 'positive evidence' of language proficiency, with questions around the authenticity of its authorship:

"The personal statement...can give a good indication, but can be, you know, you have to take it slightly with a pinch of salt, because obviously students have had plenty of time to prepare, to get that checked by external people. Otherwise, you know, it does give you a *slight* indication, but it can be not always entirely trustworthy."

On the other hand, qualifications of English-medium study (and perhaps work experience in English-speaking countries) are used as positive "counter evidence" to justify acceptance of borderline cases where a sub-score falls short 0.5:

"Things like looking at their qualifications, so, have they been taught in English? A lot of qualifications even from European universities or other overseas universities now are being increasingly taught in English. That's not to say that we can necessarily accept that in lieu of an English test in all cases. But it does at least give us an indication that, they've been taught in English, they're probably quite confident in their language ability. So if they've missed by 0.5, it's probably more to do with the test itself, their kind of performance on the day, than it is to do with their understanding of English. Also things like their work experience, you know, if they've included the CV..."

4.3 Rationale for selection approach and practices

When asked about the factors contributing to the current selection approach and practices, the informant characterised the current practices as "inherited", "established" practices – guidelines set out within the university and followed by admissions officers. She also considered the diversity of international students' background as something that necessitates the exercise of flexibility in their admissions selection.

"They are only using guidelines that we've set ourselves as a university. So, you know if someone new joins the team, they will be told: *here are the guidelines*."

"I think there is a lot of inherited practice. I think it's something that has been a sort of an established practice within the admissions teams for a long time...and I do believe that our practices were slightly different from the central team, mostly just because we're dealing with more international students, so it was always going to be more flexible and more different."

She went on to explain that international admissions at their university has "always had a recruitment focus", and that the international admissions team and the recruitment team are in collaboration when it comes to selection processes.

"I think that some of the practices have come from the international team, and from now my input and my colleagues input into selection processes from a recruitment perspective. So we are wanting to encourage flexibility, because we obviously are wanting to encourage more student enrolments."



"And, from the international admissions team perspective, we always had a recruitment focus as part of the admissions."

The flexibility in how the language proficiency requirement is met, as well as the positive-outcome orientation in the selection process described above, therefore, can be seen as closely related to a recruitment motivation. This is further manifested in the ways language proficiency requirements are set, as we explore in Section 4.4 below.

4.4 How language proficiency requirements are set

4.4.1 The process of setting or changing the requirements

Similar to Case Study TSU06-B, as an admissions officer working at the level of implementation (of admissions requirements), the informant reported not having been involved in the setting of language proficiency requirements. She said it would have been a combination of academic staff and the admissions team, but she was not sure who exactly or when the current requirements were set. However, based on her colleagues' experience, the informant described the general process (in cases initiated by the recruitment team) as beginning with market analysis by the recruitment team and communication with their in-country contacts. The recruitment team would submit a proposal for changes to the requirements. After a follow-up meeting, it would then go through a more formal process where the changes are approved by the head of student recruitment, head of admissions, and in a vice chancellor group.

"I've not been directly involved in that as yet, but I know that other colleagues in recruitment have been involved, and usually it would be through conversations and sort of doing market analysis really, and so with contacts that they have in-country, with perhaps the university in question if it's a university, and then it would be down to the contact at [this university], so that the recruitment team then submit a proposal as to why those changes should be considered, and then...there might be another follow-up meeting. It would need to be, if it's agreed, then obviously it needs to go through a more formal process."

Thus, it can be seen that at least one way in which language proficiency requirements are set or changed is driven by recruitment considerations. The market-driven nature of the process is perhaps most evident in cases where the process of reviewing existing requirements is initiated by the institution's in-country contacts (student recruitment agents).

"But, yeah, essentially it can come from an initial conversation that comes up in country with a particular contact saying *well, hey, why don't you accept this particular qualification that is taught in English, instead of IELTS? Can you do this?* Often it's recruitment driven. So it's, you know, partner saying well, the problem is, we'd send you more if you didn't have all these IELTS requirements. But can you not just accept this qualification [test/exam] that we do, or can you not just accept this degree that we have, and then we would look into it, and follow up on that. So that's often how it comes about from somebody in country feeding back some intelligence and then, ultimately the decision has to come as to whether that's we think that's viable or not."

As these cases arise, the university then has to look further into the relevant qualifications and the curriculum of the prior study to inform a decision on whether to accept them as an alternative to IELTS in meeting the language proficiency requirement.



"And those are the types of inquiries and cases that we will look into and investigate. We won't necessarily be able to say yes, in the immediate, or maybe not in the future, but it's there. Yeah, those are the cases that we as a team would be looking at, and then needing to investigate a little bit more along with getting academic teams involved to look at the curriculum and those kind of things to see if it's something we really could consider. So those are the cases that are being sort of different. But often they've taken IB and it's an international school. We can consider those or IGCSEs or GCSEs or something like that, and it's not a problem."

4.4.2 The basis of setting or changing the requirements

On the question of the basis for setting or changing the language proficiency requirements (e.g. minimum IELTS scores), the informant cited several factors, ranging from feedback from academic staff, knowledge about IELTS scores, visa requirements, and market competitor analysis. Below is an extract where she cited an example of the minimum IELTS score lowered for a particular discipline based on the feedback from academics:

Researcher: Do you know of or remember any courses or faculties raising their scores, for example, or lowering the scores?

"Raising – I don't remember any. Lowering – we did, the [school/faculty] did lower their scores. So, across the board in their postgraduate courses, that used to be 6.5, and it got lower to 6...So that's the only one I think, and I think that was based on feedback from those various teams from the faculty, you know, 6 was an acceptable level. It was suitable for postgraduate."

Other factors motivating changes in the existing language proficiency criteria can be seen more evidently as examples of interaction between recruitment and admissions. For example, the levels at which the market competitors set their language proficiency requirements would seem to be an important driving force for reviewing the institution's own requirements, and changes are made following market competitor analysis.

"We might get feedback from one of our representatives that says, oh XYZ university is doing this, as then we might be prompted to do a bit of analysis ourselves, have a look at what our competitors are doing and when it comes to their criteria..."

Often universities will post it on their web pages, their requirements. So we then have a look at what they're doing. Obviously you want to see what type of university they are and if they are similar to us. Is it something we should therefore be considering. So those would all be things that would then go into a report if you were proposing a change, so that's the level that we would look at."

Another example of interaction between admissions and recruitment is seen in how market-specific entry criteria might be set and justified based on the typical language skill profile of the cohort, or the kinds of schools in which these students receive their secondary education.

"And so some kind of practices in terms of being flexible are things that we've pushed for, hoping and aiming to increase and boost our student numbers from particular countries, and particularly when we might have information about that particular country that suggests that students coming from that country tend to have lower scores in, say, Speaking. But there are other factors, you know, perhaps we have information about the school that they go to, and we know that this school is particularly strong, you know, it's an international school, it's an English[-medium] high school, and so students coming from that will be particularly strong, so...these are the top-level schools that you want to be a bit more flexible with. So those are the kind of processes that get influenced, I think, get changed by the recruitment team as we get more and more information from our contacts and sources."

In addition, there are occasions where the university comes to an agreement with partner institutions to accept their sub-degree programs as meeting both the academic and language requirements for admission into their degree programs.



"There are some instances where we've had– we've arranged so that there's one I can't remember where it was, we were able– we've got an agreement now to accept their pre-Masters course as evidence not just of academic ability but [also] English language, so to exempt students coming through from there for our postgraduate programs, which was something that we've worked at and looked at in collaboration with the university."

"So we can accept a whole range of different qualifications. We have our own list that we work from, and that's something that we review, you know as and when– we would review it fairly regularly, I would say, but also as an when challenges arise, that would be something that's taken back to look up together with the admissions team and with the visa and immigration team, the compliance team."

As the informant explained, therefore, there are various ways in which the institution's language proficiency requirements for admission may be reviewed and changed, with new qualifications and prior study programs added to their list through collaboration and joint decision-making among recruitment, admissions, and visa compliance teams.

4.4.3 The role of internationalisation

The practices in setting and using test scores and other language proficiency evidence in admissions selection discussed above can be linked to the university's international strategy. From the perspective of student recruitment, the university has specific target numbers of international students recruited, a target to increase the number/proportion of international students in time, as well as target numbers for specific markets.

"Well, we have an international strategy, I mean...I'm not sure I can really comment. Effectively it's just a driver for the university to be more global reaching, to increase the number of international students that we have on campus, which is something we want to increase year-on-year. So we have our own targets within our global recruitment team as to the number of international students that we recruit... percentage-wise, also specific numbers for specific markets, and that's something that I think most global recruitment teams across universities would be pushing towards."

"I think as a university, we always have been quite global looking, and global reaching in terms of our mentality in the types of programs that we're offering, but it's in our interest to increase international student enrolments financially, you know, obviously economically, international students bring a lot of resources in, and also from a collaboration point of view. So I think all of those things definitely do feed into the strategy of the university relating to admissions, and that's something that again ...we're working on– we're not there yet a hundred percent with the widening of our recruitment and admissions."

As remarked by the informant, there is a clear economic motivation to increase international student enrolments. Therefore, it is an important agenda shared by student recruitment teams at this university and others, in tandem with other strategies related to internationalisation, such as expanding the types of programs on offer and collaboration on degree programs with international partner institutions.



4.5 Awareness and perceptions of guidance from IELTS Partners

When asked about awareness of guidance from the IELTS Partners in setting minimum score requirements, the informant reported that admissions staff mainly use guidelines set by the university. The fact that the guidance document available on IELTS website was not referenced in the informant's response may mean that the admissions staff in this context are not fully aware of its availability.

"They are only using guidelines that we've set ourselves as a university. So, you know if someone new joins the team, they will be told here are the guidelines. That is what we accept. I mean, we do— when I was in admissions, I did go to an IELTS training seminar, which was delivered by IELTS, and giving information on practice..."

However, as the informant went on to explain, she has attended a training seminar for admissions officers organised by IELTS. This was attended on a voluntary basis, not as a prerequisite for admissions officers in the institution.

4.5.1 Usefulness of training seminar

According to the informant, the training seminar offered by IELTS is useful mainly in terms of helping admissions staff better understand the meaning of the IELTS scores, which, as she remarked, could otherwise "just be numbers...on a page".

"Yeah. I think it's really useful to have been part of that type of training, because I think it gives you a better understanding of what the actual test entails, what you're looking at a document, otherwise, it can just be numbers to you on a page. I think it's good to understand how the assessment takes place, to understand how there might be differences from one test to another test."

The informant went on to explain what was involved in the training seminar, how it changed her own perceptions about the kinds of performance corresponding to particular band levels, and how this could be useful to admissions staff.

"So what we did in that session, it's quite an interactive session, and there was some kind of a chance to practice sort of assessing, so they play you a clip of a student in a Speaking exam, for example, and you'd have to use the framework that they normally would use for marking...making you *think* about your own perception of what an IELTS 5.0 actually sounds like, because you might think that— certainly from my point of view, I thought that students were much lower level from having heard them than actually they would have been marked on the IELTS scale. So it just was kind of interesting from an IELTS setting. At that stage, obviously, I wasn't, you know, I'm just not really now involved in setting IELTS scores definitively, but from a university setting perspective, it's quite interesting to attend those type of workshops, because it makes you think – is the level that I'm putting out there a suitable level for students, based on now what I know, and how I know that it's assessed. So I do believe that that's the kind of training that a lot of the team will have gone on at some point or will be trained."

What seems particularly pertinent in the informant's comment is how she considered understanding the meaning of an IELTS score (the quality of language performance it represents, the assessment tasks through which the test scores are generated) to be important to admissions staff as test score users. This seems to stand in contrast with the perceptions of the informant in Case Study TSU06-B, who deemed this useful but not essential knowledge to an admissions officer, as it would not affect their ability in screening applications and checking their test scores against the set entry criteria.



This perhaps remains a difference of opinion – whether and how much score users need to know the meaning of a test score beyond "a number on the page". Perhaps of even greater significance is the perceived importance for admissions staff (administrative and academic) who set the minimum score requirements to gain knowledge of a test score's meaning in order to make an informed decision about "a suitable level for students". Her remark about how her own perceptions of the level of performance corresponding to a score band changed through the marking exercise in the seminar further underlined the importance of such training opportunities.

4.5.2 Suggestions for guidelines and training

The main suggestion for the IELTS Partners in providing guidance was in terms of tailoring the information for admissions staff as score users.

"I suppose something maybe in a bit more palatable format, because they go to quite a lot of detail, on the marking scheme. Yeah, I suppose any information, any guidance from the test provider themselves about, and recommendations for suitability for ability in language and ability to cope with certain levels of written discourse or conversation is always something that's useful."

"There's an element of trust involved. So I think that sometimes too much information can be a bit kind of extraneous. I think it can be a bit overwhelming for universities."

Score users' need to understand the meaning of test scores beyond "numbers on a page", and the informant's suggestion here about the format and level of detail in the guidance materials, point to a delicate balance. The most useful information to admissions staff, as the informant suggested, might be the score-based inferences about the test-takers' abilities of language use in academic studies being specified in the guidance material for score users. This will also need to be communicated in language that is readily understood by non-specialists in language assessment.

As for the training seminar provided by the IELTS Partners, the informant stressed its importance as required training for new admissions staff. Accordingly, she highlighted the need for provision of localised, on-demand training in light of admissions staff turnaround.

"I do think, I mean, the kind of training sessions that are run regularly by IELTS, as an example, I'm not sure about other tests providers, but that was really useful, and I think that's something that should be encouraged for admissions teams to participate in, or for it to be brought to the university to the team, because that does help you understand how scores are reached, how the exam is assessed. It gives you a little bit more knowledge to what you're looking at, so I think it'll be useful, not so much that I would suggest a change, but more that I think that should be something that is a bit more encouraged, slash obligatory, for admissions team, to give them a better understanding."

"I think it would need to be [on demand], partly because admissions teams are, you know, often changing. I mean, teams don't just follow the academic calendar when it comes to recruitment, recruiting new members. So, I think it certainly needs to be something that's available on a regular basis...I think it needs to be a priority a little bit more, for that to be completed as part of maybe a checklist of training that needs to happen when you join a new team, but also a refresher course, I think it's useful for everyone who's involved in any kind of admissions related procedure to be up-to-date and knowledgeable about those changes, the same as you would expect to be with Tier 4 regulations all those kind of things as well."



As seen in the extract above, she also considered it useful for existing admissions staff to attend the training as a refresher course, and to keep up-to-date with any changes. Her comments reflect an orientation towards more well-informed admissions decision-making.

4.6 Views about good practice

Finally, with reference to good practice in using language test scores (and by extension, other language proficiency evidence) in university admissions selection, the informant advocated for a degree of flexibility in making admissions decisions – this was evidenced throughout her responses, but also highlights the importance for having central guidelines in place to ensure a level of consistency across different faculty-based admissions teams.

"I think it's good practice to have a guideline, and have a base score that you would consider, because I think that does indicate a certain level of proficiency, a certain level of ability to cope with a particular course. I do think that there should be a degree of flexibility agreed upon across the whole team, you know across the whole of admissions, and I think that there should be a level of consistency so that whoever's making that decision knows that it's something that is accepted, that they're able to be use their own discretion. And, I think what we have seen perhaps in the past are some discrepancies between teams, with some teams being more flexible and others very rigid."

"So we have faculty-based admissions teams. So everyone's got their own portfolio of courses within a faculty, and then with that sits within a faculty team within admissions, so some faculties will have, and some courses will have additional requirements, and therefore higher language requirements as well. Maybe they'll have interview processes. There'll be other processes involved. Some teams don't have that. And what we've noticed a little bit is that there tend to be some difference between some teams being able to say, yes we'll will drop a little bit lower, consider that student; and others being very rigid and not wanting to do so. So I think good practice is having a universally acknowledged degree of flexibility so that you know what you are and aren't able to accept."

It is perhaps precisely the need for consistency and fairness ("some teams being more flexible, other teams being very rigid") that often motivates and justifies a rigid, 'lockstep' approach to admissions selection – as well as the preference for using standardised tests over other forms of language proficiency evidence. However, this places the decision-making entity in the inevitable "equity vs. equality" dilemma – as we will see in Case Study TSU04-C, having institution-wide consistency in what is and is not accepted does come with its own problems, compelling faculties/departments to sometimes veer away from what would otherwise seem logical and contextually appropriate decisions.

5 Case study B

5.0 Admissions context

The context of this case study is international student admissions for undergraduate and taught postgraduate programs at a Post-1992 group university. The informant (TSU06-B) had a former role (c. 10 years ago) as an admissions officer, screening international students' applications to undergraduate and taught postgraduate programs. She also had a more recent role in research postgraduate admissions. As a result of her experience, she was able to offer a kind of 'historical perspective' on issues such as changes in visa requirements and developments related to the trustworthiness of language test score certificates.

5.1 Admissions selection process and use of test scores

According to the informant, the process involves the admissions officer checking the applicant's academic qualifications against the entry criteria for a particular program, then evidence of their English language proficiency against the entry criteria. The admissions officer makes a decision whether to make an offer based entirely on the applicant's qualifications (academic and language) meeting the entry requirements or not. It is only applications for advanced entry (onto year 2 or year 3 of the degree program) where an academic would have to review the application and perform a mapping of qualifications before an admissions decision is made, although the academics of the degree programs are also able to occasionally override the decision made by the admissions officer.

English language proficiency is therefore checked right at the beginning as the applications come in, and many applicants already supply such evidence. According to the informant, the predominant form of evidence supplied is IELTS scores, for example, by students from southeast Asia and China. A GCSE English equivalent qualification was commonly used for students from Anglophone Africa, although this changed with the introduction of Tier 4 visa requirements. Where language proficiency evidence is not available, a conditional offer is usually made, and the applicant is asked to take an IELTS test. Where the applicant's academic qualifications do not meet the entry criteria, they would receive an outright rejection. The informant noted that for research postgraduate admissions, most applicants will meet the language requirement through holding a previous English-medium degree (e.g., a taught Master's in the UK), in contrast with the preponderance of IELTS scores being used as language proficiency evidence among undergraduate and taught postgraduate programs.

For borderline cases, the decisions are made by the head of admissions or an academic on a case-by-case basis, although the informant noted that the number of accepted borderline cases has gone down in consideration of the consequences of visa refusals on the university's license as a visa sponsor.

"It would be somebody higher than admissions officer that would make that decision and I think they cut down a lot, with the immigration, because universities only got a certain allowance of visa refusals that were allowed before our license is at risk. So as immigration has become tighter, you're not going to risk taking on somebody that you think might have a visa rejection. It's not worth the risk to take them on."

An example of a borderline case was provided, where the applicant fell slightly short on the Reading sub-score in IELTS, and was admitted onto a research degree program following an ad hoc assessment given by the department.



"I remember one case with a PhD student who was below on Reading, and this was back when the Border Agency rules weren't quite so strict. So the academic set him a reading task to do, just like a private one, to prove that it was okay, and the student was ultimately accepted...I think they were probably on like a 5.5. or something, so they weren't far below. And I think they must have been fine on Speaking and Listening and Writing, but I think it was just the Reading they were a little bit below on. BUT, knowing who the student was, I'm not sure that was the right decision, because they weren't successful."

While the informant did not comment on using in-house assessments as a general practice, she expressed scepticism towards the admissions decision made in that particular case.

5.2 Use of test scores and other proficiency evidence

When asked about the different types of language proficiency evidence used in admissions, the informant noted IELTS as the language test most commonly taken by applicants. As an admissions officer processing the applications, she also expressed her preference towards IELTS due to the introduction of the anti-fraud facility at the time.

"But IELTS, it was the most common, and then TOEFL, and then I don't think I've ever even saw a Pearson one to be honest. And then occasionally you get the Cambridge ones...Generally I would probably say 75% of them would give us an IELTS."

"Again, IELTS was the best one because, once they brought in the anti-fraud thing, you could verify it."

The second form of proficiency evidence often supplied and accepted was an English-medium high school qualification or university degree, for example, a GCSE equivalent from some African countries as mentioned above. However, they were no longer accepted following the introduction of Tier 4 visa requirements.

"When did we do Tier 4? At least 10 years ago. I would have thought. And then the government had list of countries that they considered to be English-speaking, and then you kind of had to use the government's list. Otherwise if you got it wrong, you risk the student having a visa rejected. So even though we were satisfied that their qualifications would be suitable for this to get onto the course, we couldn't risk from having a visa rejected because the UKVI wasn't satisfied that they had recognised English qualification."

"I know pretty much it's the kind of countries that you would expect to speak English...And I think if I recall a lot of the African countries that we presume to be English-speaking didn't necessarily appear with [sic] the government's website."

The informant noted some discrepancies between countries whose English-medium qualifications used to be accepted by the university and the government's published list of majority English-speaking countries where qualifications would be accepted to meet the English language proficiency requirement for visa purposes. The outcome was the university changing their policy on what was accepted in compliance with the new visa requirements.

The personal statement, although typically submitted as part of the application, plays little role in admissions decision-making, according to the informant. The decision is still primarily based on the applicant's academic and language qualifications meeting the entry criteria.



5.2.1 Trustworthiness of evidence

It emerged from the interview that a prime factor for the trustworthiness of proficiency evidence relates to the authenticity and security of the evidence. According to the informant, over her tenure as admissions officer, there was a time when fraudulent language test certificates were highly common. While she had developed expertise and confidence in detecting fraudulent test certificates, she cited IELTS's provision of an online verification system as instrumental to the admission officer's confidence in using IELTS scores as language proficiency evidence.

"When I was first an admissions officer, the IELTS certificates, you know, they were clearly fraudulent, like really obviously fraudulent, and it was common. And I got quite good at spotting them...I used to quite enjoy doing that...Because it was a challenge to pick out."

"But the online verification was really helpful because [the fraud was] just cut out completely. It's just, you know, almost instantly. As soon as you can verify it online, the fraud stopped."

Transparency in test design and delivery, in other words, how the test scores came about, was also cited as contributing to the admissions officer's confidence as a score user.

"And I went to an IELTS seminar once where they actually talked you through how they take the test and what they do and what have you, and you just come away feeling that it's sort of the market leader, that you're in a safe pair of hands."

A notable factor that moderates the trustworthiness of the proficiency evidence, as identified by the informant, is its time validity. Putting herself in the shoes of a prospective student, she questioned the time validity of English-medium high school qualification as evidence of current English proficiency and readiness for English-medium academic study.

"I mean it always concerned me that, when under that logic, I did a German GCSE when I was 15 16, I got a B there, and by this point I was you know, it was 15 years later, under that logic, I would have been able to go to Germany to study my Master's. And I know damn well, there's no way on earth I would have been able to go to Germany to study my Master's, but it used to concern me that you'd be looking at their GCSE. And they've done their GCSE 10, 15 years ago. And that was their English level of qualification, and we used to accept them...Even if it was a long time ago. If they had that qualification, it was accepted."

This echoes the policy in the admission context in Case Study TSU04-C, where the English-medium degree must have been completed within two years of the program start date for it to be accepted as valid language proficiency evidence. However, the issue of time validity of IELTS scores or other forms of proficiency evidence was not explicitly discussed by informants in other case studies.

Overall, the informant in this admissions context displayed a positive attitude towards the trustworthiness of IELTS scores as a form of proficiency evidence. She did maintain a degree of criticality towards test scores, citing reservations about: a) the effects of cramming for a test on the scores' validity; and b) how far one's academic language skills can be extrapolated from the test.



"I mean it [test scores] gives you an indication. I don't think it's perfect because you can cram for a test, and also if you've sat your IELTS before, you kind of know what you're going to be asked. So it gives you an indication, but I don't think it's perfect, because reading a section of a book, and answering questions on it is not the same as having to read hundreds of books and all kinds of authors and all kinds of way people write. In all honesty, I don't think there is anything better for sort of the mass market, if you like."

Nevertheless, she considered using language test scores the most, if not the only, practical approach in the context of admissions decision-making at the institutional level – a point that we explore further in the following section.

5.3 Rationale for selection approach and practices

When asked about the rationale underlying the admissions selection approach and practices adopted in this context, the informant cited the factors of efficiency and conversion rate, and contrasted the admissions selection procedures for taught and research degree programs.

"[Y]ou're recruiting on a mass, that you're trying to recruit as many people as possible because then they're not all going to come...I mean, as admissions officer, I've said you would have a pile of applications, possibly, you know, a hundred, and you'd have to try and do them as quickly as possible, because it's getting the offers out there and hoping that some of those people will actually convert into students."

"[F]or PhD student, you are very much one-on-one, so you could interview them and you can do a face-to-face interview and have Skype and you can chat for a few months before you actually offer them a place. But you just can't do that for taught undergraduate, particularly when there's hundreds of courses. So, you just need to do them as quickly and as well as possible."

As the informant asserted, the number of incoming applications and the efficiency thus required to process them necessitates the selection approach described – screening through the applications and making admissions decisions based on matching qualifications against set entry criteria, as opposed to more holistic evaluations similar to those in Case Study TSU04-C or in the context of research postgraduate admissions selection. Closely related to the need for efficiency in processing application en masse is the recruitment drive of conversion from offers to enrolments.

There are indeed borderline cases that are reviewed on a case-by-case basis after the more 'lockstep' selection process (O'Loughlin, 2011), as described above. However, any flexibility to accept applicants following this approach has been heavily moderated in consideration of compliance to the government's visa requirements.

"[B]ecause universities only got a certain allowance of visa refusals that were allowed before our license is at risk. So as immigration has become tighter, you're not going to risk taking on somebody that you think might have a visa rejection... If you've got people who are going to have their visa rejected, and it counts against the university, [so] if you've got it looking like a visa rejection, you just wouldn't make the risk."



While the informant described the selection approach (screening process) as partly recruitment-driven, in terms of conversion from offers to enrolments, the informant reported that there were no particular dialogues or collaboration between the recruitment and admissions team at the time she was in role, although she would not rule out the possibility of discussions having taken place between the recruitment team and more senior admissions staff.

5.4 How language proficiency requirements are set

The main theme that emerged from the informant's responses was that she was not involved in the process of setting the requirements, nor was she provided with the knowledge of how the requirements were set.

"I don't know how the entry criteria were set. So when you are an admissions officer you just had– this is our entry criteria and you just make sure that they met their criteria, how people decided what the entry criteria actually is – I don't know."

She speculated that the process was a high-level decision, and that the requirements would have been set during the validation of a degree program, although she did not know the details.

"I presume it must go to a pretty major board. I can't imagine that it's is a local decision. I think it's probably [a vice chancellor group]. It's quite crucial to the university. So I'm pretty certain it would be a high-level decision, but I don't know the process and that, I'm afraid."

"I think the university's entry criteria is decided like in-house somehow, but I don't actually know how, so I don't know– I think maybe in the course validation documents. I think maybe when the course is validated, I think they have to say what the entry criteria is. And then I guess it must go through some kind of a board. But this university's standard English is IELTS 6, and then anything unusual has to be validated with a special entry criteria."

She recalled two instances where the language proficiency requirements (minimum test scores) were changed. The first instance was institution-wide, adding minimum scores for the four skills following new government requirements:

"I think we used to just ask for an overall score of 6. And then again with the government changes, we then had to have no less than I think 5.5 in each of the sub-scores."

The second instance was influenced by the market and was recruitment-driven:

"Yeah, there would have been. The entry criteria would change, depending on whatever I guess, you know the market was. So yeah, absolutely, entry criteria have changed..."

Researcher: Do you know whether it was recruitment driven or...

"Probably. I don't see why it wouldn't be, if you've got a market and you can recruit them. And yes, but again, I wasn't high up the food chain to make those decisions... [The minimum scores] were brought down."



However, as evident in the informant's comments, the decision-making process in changing language proficiency requirements did not involve her or was made transparent to her – as an admissions officer working at the level of implementing the requirements in admissions selection.

5.5 Awareness and perceptions of guidance from IELTS Partners

During the time in her role, the informant attended an IELTS training seminar for admissions officers voluntarily, not as a requirement within the university's admissions team. She viewed the value of the training seminar mainly in terms of: 1) the opportunity to network with other admissions officers and share experiences; 2) understanding the meaning of test scores and using that knowledge in the student-facing aspect of her role; and 3) the reassurance about the test's security against fraud.

"It's always nice to go and learn more about something that you use every day. And also it's nice to meet other people from other universities...And I always find that they're kind of comforting because then you meet other administrators, and we tend to all have the same issues."

"It was nice and I learned a lot from it. It didn't necessarily make me any better or worse at my job. I very much like if I understand why I'm doing something... Yeah, I mean it's nice to be able to empathise with applicants and students because you're on the other side of it, and if they're talking to you asking questions or got complaints or whatever it may be, it gives you a better grounding to be able to deal with your student if you know what they're talking about."

"[They] talked about how the students sat the test, how long they had, what they were supposed to do, and the safety of it – had to check that you weren't having people take tests in somebody else's name. All of that was reassuring that, you know, this was a genuine test that you know was difficult to submit something fraudulently. But again, it was useful knowledge, but I wouldn't say it was essential."

On balance, however, she reflected that, while such knowledge makes one "a better member of staff", it is not "essential" knowledge that would have made a difference to the admissions decision-making aspect of her job.

"So I think anything you can do to encourage your knowledge makes you a better member of staff. But...it wasn't essential for me because I was still able to do my job without it."

Accordingly, she considered training for existing admissions staff necessary only if major changes to the IELTS test were introduced, but would recommend such training to staff who are new to admissions.

5.6 Views about good practice

Overall, the informant considered the use of IELTS scores (or those from other standardised language tests) as English language proficiency evidence a good fit with the admissions officer's role, as they require a piece of trustworthy evidence for efficient admissions decision-making. Her comment below encapsulates this view:



"In all honesty. I don't think there is anything better for sort of the mass market, if you like. And the very nature of admissions is that you're not an academic, so you can't use your individual judgment on every single applicant. They are, at that point, just an applicant on paper. So you don't know their hopes and dreams and personalities. You've got to just look at them as "Are they qualified? Yes or No." So in terms of that, I think IELTS is great because it gives you a clear "Yes, they can listen. Yes, they can read. Yes, they can write. Yes, they can speak.", which is the things that you need to be able to do to do a degree successfully."

However, she cautioned against over-interpreting the language test scores, particularly in making inferences about the students' academic literacy⁷ and adaptivity to the learning and cultural environments. When asked about what would constitute good practice in using test scores in the university admissions context, she emphasised the importance for different score users (stakeholder groups) to be cautious about interpreting test scores.

"I don't think you should rely on them completely. And I think just because a student gets a good test result, it doesn't necessarily mean when they hit the ground as an actual student, in a different country, that's probably very different to how they learn in their own country. I don't think you can assume that, well you've got an IELTS 6.0, therefore, of course, you're qualified. There needs to be support for people who, you know, just crammed for the test and did well on the day, and then came here and found that they were possibly out of their depth."

Researcher: Who do you think shouldn't rely completely on IELTS scores?

"Well, universities in general. It's just a piece of the journey. It's not be-all and end-all. There needs to be support for the students when they get here. They [students] need to realise that, just because they got an IELTS score, if they get to the UK, and find they are struggling, then they need to recognise that they are going to need to go and get help. But I don't think they necessarily do recognise that they're struggling. And they don't seem willing to take the help that's available to them. And then they don't pass!"

Her second comment (and the one about academic reading demands cited earlier) reflects a view that rightly differentiates language proficiency and academic literacy (as disparate constructs), and which distinguishes between being ready to embark on academic study and having full-fledged academic literacy skills (as different milestones or developmental stages). It has also drawn out the mutual responsibilities of the higher education provider and receiver in this regard: the university needs to provide post-entry support in language and academic literacy, and the students who find themselves struggling should take up support; rather than either party over-extrapolating ("relying on") from language test scores and attributing difficulties or failures in the students' higher education experience simply to inadequate language proficiency – a view resonating with that of the EAP program informant TSU01-E (Case Study E) and the postgraduate program director informant TSU05-D (Case Study D).

7. Wingate (2018) has defined academic literacy as "the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community; this encompasses reading, evaluating information, as well as presenting, debating and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing. These capabilities require knowledge of the community's epistemology, of the genres through which the community interacts, and of the conventions that regulate these interactions." (p.350).

6 Case study C

6.0 The admissions context

The admission context in this case study is the graduate school for a discipline in the social sciences within a Russell Group university in the UK. The school offers taught Master's, postgraduate diploma, and doctoral programs. The informant (TSU04-C) is the administrator for all the postgraduate programs, and is responsible for the initial screening of applications before they are reviewed by academic admissions officers.

6.1 Admissions selection process and use of test scores

According to the informant, each application to the postgraduate programs goes through initial screening by the administrative officer, who checks if the applicant meets the entry requirements of the program. All applications that meet the entry requirements are then reviewed by two admission officers who are academics of the faculty. The admissions officers assess, first and foremost, the academic merit of the applicant, in terms of their undergraduate degree and the level and breadth of knowledge they have acquired on the subject. All applicants who do not have an undergraduate degree in the UK also need to have taken the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) as a compulsory entry requirement.

The admissions officers will then assess the applicant's English language proficiency based on the evidence available. Prospective students are required to have an overall IELTS score of 7.5, with 7.0 in each of the four skill components, or equivalent scores in other accepted language tests as published on the university website. The minimum language test score requirement for these postgraduate programs are the same as the university-wide requirement for postgraduate programs. The language test score requirement may be waived for applicants of nationalities on a list specified by the university, or having completed a three-year English-medium undergraduate program in one of the countries on the same list within two years of the start date of the proposed program⁸. It should be noted that applicants are not required to submit a language test score at the time of the application – it is a condition to be met after an offer has been made. As such, applications may come with or without a language test score. Where an applicant has submitted the results of a language test, the overall score and the sub-scores (for each language skill) are checked against the minimum score requirement. For applications without a test score, an initial evaluation of the applicant's language ability is made using other forms of evidence (see below).

The decision to make an offer or not is made by the academic admissions officers, based on both the academic and language criteria. The offers made are then checked by the central admissions office to see whether entry requirements are met and who may then make conditional/unconditional offers to applicants. The submission of IELTS (or other accepted language test) scores which meet the minimum requirement (unless otherwise waived) is a condition that needs to be met before an applicant is made an unconditional offer.

6.2 Use of test scores and other proficiency evidence

According to the informant, four forms of language proficiency evidence other than language test scores may be used in evaluating applications:

1. the GRE verbal section and analytic writing section (from applicants without a UK undergraduate degree)
2. the writing on the application form
3. a statement of prior learning in the subject area
4. the referees' evaluation.

8. To protect the anonymity of the admission context and the admission personnel interviewed, references to information sources about admission requirements (university webpages) are omitted.



The first way in which these other forms of evidence are used is before any language test scores become available – if IELTS or other language test scores are not submitted at the time of the application. These forms of evidence are used as an initial assessment of the applicant's language proficiency, and part of an evaluation of the overall strength of the application.

"What happens more often is there are no test scores given at the application stage, but we are a bit concerned about the English ability, while their application is strong. But we know that they are going to be asked to do a language test [by the university], and they will have to meet the requirements."

The second way is that they may be used in conjunction with the test scores in the decision-making process, in cases where the test scores are submitted at the time of the application:

Researcher: If an applicant supplies a test score, if it meets the requirement, is that 'a tick', or would you still look at the other kinds of evidence, how they write etc.?

"I think we would look at it as an overall application, definitely. Even when they meet the test score [requirement], if someone highlighted that there's a problem, that would be a cause for concern."

"In cases where test scores were submitted along with the application, and they meet the minimum requirement...[the statement] is something that would stop us from making an offer if we were concerned about what they've written, or what the referee said about their English language ability. We'd put the application on hold, if someone or something flagged up that their English is actually quite poor. It doesn't often happen, I should say. Usually their English is fine, and we rarely flag that up."

Notably, these other forms of evidence (e.g. written documents in the application, the referee's comments) are sometimes used to moderate or challenge the test scores in making inferences about the applicant's English language ability as part of the decision-making process. Nevertheless, they are not treated as sufficient to be used in lieu of language test scores to meet the language proficiency requirement.

Researcher: For other kinds of language proficiency evidence – have they been used in place of test scores or combined with test scores?...The document that applicants produce describing their prior study – you have always looked at that as one source of evidence of writing proficiency as well?

"Yes. But we can't use that – the test is still the most important thing."

6.2.1 Trustworthiness of evidence

The informant's evaluation of each form of language proficiency evidence reflected the perceived trustworthiness of that form of evidence and provided some insights into the abovementioned practices in the use of test scores vs. other forms of evidence.

The following are some indicative comments:

On GRE test score

"[The] GRE test, a Graduate Record Examination, which for us is compulsory before we'll consider an application...also gives us some indication for language, because there's a verbal section, and an analytical writing section which gives you a good idea how a student can write."



On application form and statement of prior learning

Researcher: Is there any other form of language proficiency evidence they would supply at the application form?

"Only what's written on the application form – we see how they write on the form. We also ask them to put together a document, which gives information on what topics they have covered in each of the core courses that we ask for – topics, and textbooks they've used. I understand maybe someone else could've written those documents if the applicant's English wasn't very good. But a referee would always also highlight – they will say how good someone's English is. All these different kinds of evidence are looked at."

On referee's evaluation

"You've got your references, which are definitely – you can't falsify a reference, as they have been sent electronically directly from the referees, and the applicants don't get to see the references. And they often say something about language. They usually say that this person has very good language skills, and it's supporting what we see from test scores, although sometimes the referees do flag up language issues while the test scores meet the requirement – they could say things like 'adequate', which might make you think... You can usually pick up what the referee says."

As can be seen in the informant's comments, writing samples – the application form and the statement of prior learning – give an indication of the applicant's writing ability, but the authenticity of their authorship can be questioned. Referees' evaluation is considered both trustworthy ("you can't falsify a reference") and noteworthy ("sometimes the referees do flag up language issues while the test scores meet the requirement"). As reported above, in some rare cases, such other forms of evidence may 'override' the test scores in the decision-making, resulting in the admissions team withholding making an offer.

It was evident from the informant's responses that IELTS (and other accepted language tests) scores are deemed the most trustworthy, and they are used as the principal form of evidence for applicants' language proficiency.

"...sometimes the academics would say, this is a very strong application, but we are concerned about the language. At that point I would pick that up and say [to the central admissions office] that we definitely want that person to meet the language condition through taking the IELTS or TOEFL test."

"We've gone over – what we're looking for, and how we would use it to make decisions, but it still comes back to the fact that the basic way we assess language is by accepting a language test and say they have to get a particular score in each element."

The informant acknowledged that the use of test scores as evidence for prospective students' language ability in coping with postgraduate study is not completely watertight, but problematic cases are rare and attributable to other reasons.

"[The academics] would just sometimes say 'oh, this person's writing isn't very good' especially when we get down to something like writing a dissertation. Doing [name of subject] involves a lot of mathematics, so, often students come into the program without having done an extended piece of writing like a dissertation.

It's rare, not very often. But obviously there are people whose English isn't very good but do get through. It's just the way the system works really."



6.2.2 Test scores as sole evidence or part of a holistic assessment?

While previous studies have identified institutions using language test scores either as sole evidence or as part of a holistic assessment of applicants, there seem to be elements of both in this admissions context.

Language test scores can be said to function as the "default" form of evidence in this admissions context in the sense that it is a condition to be met before an unconditional offer can be made – except for applicants who are nationals of what are commonly known as "majority English-speaking countries", or those who have completed an English-medium qualification equivalent to a UK undergraduate degree in a country on the specified list within two years of the start date of the program to which they have applied.

On the other hand, elements of a holistic assessment are seen, first and foremost, in the case-by-case approach to evaluating applications – even with a large number of incoming applications (see the overview of admissions selection process above).

"Well, for the Master's courses, we have about over 1,000 applications. And we go through them one by one. From November till end of January, so up till late April or so."

A holistic assessment approach is also seen in the way that admissions officers would weigh the evidence of individual applicants' academic merit and that of their English language proficiency in the decision-making process towards making offers. This approach is particularly apparent among applications which are put into what the informant called the 'hold' category:

"So when I send the applications to the academics, they either come back to me and say that we make an offer, that the applicant is unsuccessful, or they can't quite make a decision right now, but they would like to wait to see all the fields of the applications – so all those applications, wait right until the end. If there're spaces left, then we can make an offer to those applicants.

But I think language can be flagged up at this stage, when someone who's borderline academic[ally], then we flagged up something about language, then probably that person may not be made an offer."

In line with the holistic approach to evaluating applications, we can see that, to some degree, test scores are used in conjunction with other forms of evidence as part of a holistic evaluation of the applicant's language proficiency. Notably, however, test scores and other forms of evidence are not symmetric in their status as language proficiency evidence. The other forms would seem to be accorded the status of ancillary evidence and are used a) when language test scores are not yet available, or b) in making 'negative' decisions such as withholding making an offer.

6.2.3 Flexibility and agency in evaluating language proficiency evidence

An interesting pattern emerging in this case study relates to the degree of flexibility/rigidity in how different forms of evidence are evaluated to fulfil the English language proficiency requirement. According to the informant, there is a slight degree of flexibility with language test scores. Applicants who narrowly miss the minimum requirement for a sub-score (e.g. by 0.5 on Speaking in IELTS) may still be admitted, subject to a further in-house assessment by the language centre of the university.

"If they narrowly miss one element, and if the department is happy, we're normally happy if someone is very good as you say, they can be referred to our language centre to have an assessment. And based on what the language centre say, they could well say they are fine, and then we can waive the language condition, even if they're slightly lower on one of the elements."



However, it has to be only one sub-score, narrowly missing the mark (by 0.5 band), and is subject to the final decision of the central admissions office:

"[T]he graduate admissions office is very strict. Even if we ask for someone to be referred, they have to agree to it. And it has to be someone who's really, really close. The other day I had an applicant who fell short slightly in two elements, and there was no way they would refer them to the language centre."

By contrast, when it comes to meeting the language proficiency requirement through previous English-medium study, for example, an undergraduate degree in a country on the university-specified list, it is much more rigid, and the decision rests at the institutional (not departmental) level.

"That's across the board, there's no flexibility, that's university level. And we need to abide by what the university says about English language test, and when the test can be waived."

"We even had [an own university] undergraduate, from a European country, who's left, gone to work in London, and because they had been away [from university] for two years, they had to take a language test...Because they are [name of European nationality], they have been away from academic work for two years, even though they've worked in London. There's no negotiation for that. It's the university policy that anyone who isn't a native English speaker or isn't at a UK university at that time – even though they were at a UK university. For me, that kind of inflexibility is sometimes frustrating."

This was a case where the informant's faculty made an attempt to recommend waiving the language test score condition, but which was not approved by the central admissions office.

"There's no question of waiving it. The university doesn't allow faculties or departments to waive the English test in any way. We have no control over it. You can set a higher limit if you want to, but we can't say this person doesn't have to do a language test, or this person we accept a lower test score."

The academic department, however, has a higher degree of agency in requiring a second language test from the applicant (rather than referring them to the language centre) if the first one narrowly misses the minimum requirement in the first attempt:

"Yes. Sometimes there's a sheet I have to fill in when we're making the offer, and there's a tick box, saying if this person doesn't meet the language condition with the test, would you allow them to be referred to the language centre. And if we're worried about the person's language in any way, I would tick that box and say, no, they have to meet it through a test rather than being referred to the language centre. So we do have that control, because sometimes the academics would say, this is a very strong application, but we are concerned about the language. At that point, I would pick that up and say the we definitely want that person to meet the language condition through taking the IELTS or TOEFL test."

Overall, then, in terms of decision-making around the language proficiency condition, we can see that academic departments have some, but perhaps a limited degree of agency. Waiving a language test is entirely an institutional-level decision. Academic departments have the choice of setting a higher minimum test score than the university-wide requirement but cannot set a lower minimum score. Interestingly, it would also seem that departments as gatekeepers have more agency in making 'negative' decisions



(rejecting an application) than 'positive' decisions (accepting an application) based on the test scores applicants have submitted. This is reflected in the way that departments can 'reject' a borderline-scoring applicant being referred to the language centre (see last quote above), while their 'acceptance' and referral of a borderline applicant to the language centre is subject to approval by the central admissions (see beginning of Section 2.3).

6.3 Rationale for selection approach and practices

When discussing the rationale for the rigidity around the English language proficiency requirement, particularly in terms of waiving language test scores, the informant invoked the notions of fairness and transparency as the primary concern of the institution.

"I think it's because they want to be completely transparent, in that they're not favouring one group over another, so they have this rigid rule that anyone who's not from an English-speaking country and who's not at a UK university must take an English test."

"It can be frustrating at times, but I do understand that we have to be transparent, and we can't be seen to be making exceptions to some people and not to other people."

While admitting that it can be frustrating at times for the department or individual applicants, the informant was sympathetic to the institution-wide practice and supportive of the value underpinning what could otherwise be construed as a rigid, inflexible approach. She also offered an additional perspective of 'fairness' – not in the sense of treating everyone in the same way, but in terms of weighing the consequences of different treatments to a given individual/group.

"[By not accepting English-medium degrees from all places as a waiver for language test scores, you are] perhaps eliminating some people from some countries whose English or their training is perhaps not been as good as others. But in order to cope with the course, to be able to do it, to understand, you've got to be at a certain level. It's not that you're stopping people coming. It wouldn't be fair, in a way, to allow people into the university whose English– if they weren't going to be able to cope with the language."

"I think the 'fairness' thing – in a way, that's what we're doing. Because we're being so strict across the board, and not being flexible in any way – even though we think that might be right, because that person's English might be fine. By fairness, we're saying, right, these are the rules, across the board, and there's no way of deviating from that. So, I think, in a way, I suppose it's the fairest way of doing it."

Overall, the informant viewed the institution's current practice as fair and transparent to all prospective students, and reflective of good practice in using language proficiency evidence in admissions selection.

6.4 How language proficiency requirements are set

When it comes to the setting of the language proficiency requirements, according to the informant, the institution-wide minimum score requirement was set by central admissions without consultation with individual faculties or departments. Faculties and departments have the option to set a higher (but not a lower) minimum score for their programs. The admissions context of this case study has the same minimum score requirement as the institution-wide requirement for postgraduate admissions.



The university sets the minimum score requirements, and individual faculties and departments can choose to either increase them or stay with the university requirement. This is done centrally by the university without consulting individual departments or faculties.

As described by the informant, where a faculty/department wishes to increase their minimum score, the process involves agreeing on a new minimum score by the faculty or department's committee of admissions officers (comprising both administrative officer(s) and academics), and then passing their decision on to the central postgraduate admissions office. Central admissions will then implement the change, and amend the information published on the website and prospectus accordingly.

Researcher: Would something need to be done before setting those scores?

"It would only have to be an agreement with us, our committee, and then the degree committee will refer it back to the central graduate admissions, and say this is what we would like, and [even] if they say it's a ridiculous score, they would take it on board. It'd probably have to wait a year – because everything has been done for next year. If it's agreed that this is what we want, then this will be implemented the following year."

When asked what would form the basis of the decision to raise the minimum score requirement further, the informant referred to dissertation supervisors' feedback on students' writing, and also the experience of interacting with students admitted:

"It's actually quite interesting, 'coz that was one of the things I thought of mentioning when we set our procedures for next year. We have our admissions meeting next week. I was thinking of putting that on the agenda – if anyone wanted to, felt the need to raise any of the scores...Because I think there have been times when people [academic staff] have questioned the language...and supervisors have commented that the English is not as good as they would hope. So perhaps there is a case now for increasing the requirement."

"Actually, it's mainly someone coming into the office, and I'm not sure if the student understood what I'm saying to him, for example, when a new student comes into the graduate office to ask about new procedures, and then someone [in the office] said I'm not sure if the student really understood what I was saying to him, which can be a concern."

A noteworthy observation here is that, at the local decision-making level (within faculties/ departments), both academic and administrative admissions staff have roles and the agency to instigate reviews of the minimum score requirement, based on their experience with the students' language use.

The informant also noted that, if they decide to raise the minimum score requirement, it would be the Writing sub-score that is likely to be raised.

"It won't be drastic, probably a 0.5. I think Writing would be a useful one because of what they have to do – to increase it slightly, because that's the aspect they usually fall down on. But, I don't know, I have to say in general it works well – the scores we ask for seem to pick out the people who can do it and show the people who actually can't."



However, there is also an awareness of how raising the minimum score may have an effect on student intake, in terms of the number of applicants who are able to meet the new score requirement.

"I think it could have – that's the problem, that's when you got to weigh up. It could mean we don't have as many students on our courses. Because we still make the same number of offers, but it would affect the number who meet the English language condition. So we obviously don't want to set it too ridiculously high."

6.5 Awareness and perceptions of guidance from IELTS Partners

When asked about guidance on setting minimum score requirements provided by the IELTS partners, the informant admitted not being aware of published guidance, and asked where it can be located.

Researcher: Do you know if the committee is aware of any advice provided by the IELTS Partners in terms of setting minimum scores?

"No I wasn't – we weren't aware. Where can you find that information?"

Researcher: There's an IELTS handbook which has a section for score users. But they are usually about setting minimum scores.

"I would imagine – I haven't checked other people's scores – but this university is already asking for higher scores than others."

However, there was also the perception that further guidance from the test provider may be less applicable in this context – when the current university-wide score requirement is already higher than other universities in general.

"I think it's more of an in-house thing. As I said, we've set our minimum requirements quite high anyway, and IELTS would probably accept that these are pretty strong scores. So think it's really just about whether the committee – when I get all the admissions officers together, it's useful for them to talk about how they felt about the applications they looked at this year, if they feel strongly there was any problems with the English language. But of course there's the other lot, if there's problems when they have come, then that's past the admissions stage, and we've already admitted them."

As reflected in her comment, the informant considered the setting of minimum score requirements more of an in-house decision, and noted how the admissions officers (academics) would review the score requirements based on their evaluation of the applications in a given year and their experience with the admitted cohort.

6.6 Views about good practice

Finally, when asked about what would constitute good practice in setting and implementing language proficiency requirements in university admissions selection, the informant responded as follows:

I think what we have at the moment is good practice. The fact that it's a centralised thing. It's important in a way that – ok, you can have higher scores in individual departments – but each department/faculty within the university is meeting the same minimum requirements for admitting students. I think it's good practice, and also that's why it has to be centralised.

And I also think, as I said, it's fair, and it's transparent. So the students know exactly what the situation is. I think that's the best practice really."

Echoing the earlier discussion on the rationale for the selection practices in this admissions context, she once again highlighted fairness and transparency as elements of good practice.

7 Case study D

7.0 The admissions context

The admission context in this case study is a taught postgraduate program in education within a Russell Group university in the UK. The informant (TSU05-D) teaches on various taught postgraduate programs, and she previously held the post of program director for one of the postgraduate programs. As part of that previous post, she was expected to "facilitate the admissions process" in liaison with the relevant admissions department.

7.1 Admissions selection process and use of test scores

Prior to her appointment as program director, the decision had been taken to screen applicants according to three measures, namely academic transcripts from undergraduate study; a relevant subject area covered at undergraduate level (it was often her role to determine what constituted "relevant" in this sense); and language proficiency, which was typically (although not necessarily) measured by IELTS scores, as she elaborated:

"[T]he language requirement...is aligned with a number of standardised test scores, of which IELTS is one, so not just the IELTS, but it's also aligned to TOEFL and TOEIC scores, and I think some Cambridge...other scores, but however whenever we talk about English requirements IELTS is always the one that is just mentioned for some reason."

She pointed out that the language requirement has become ever more important in recent years given how numbers of international students applying for these postgraduate programs have "exponentially skyrocketed", many of whom have English as a second language, and therefore need to demonstrate that they have an appropriate level of proficiency to be able to engage with academic study at this level.

As program director, it was not her role to examine every application made to the program, largely due to the sheer number of applications received; instead, this is the responsibility of a dedicated admissions department. Staff in that department evaluate each application received according to the three measures outlined above; on this basis, either an outright offer is made, or a "conditional" offer may be made, depending on the applicant meeting the English language requirement. Given that the primary responsibility for these decisions lies with that specific department, there were only exceptional instances when the informant herself was asked to contribute.

"The only time that I used to get to hear about it was when they sent me an email saying we have this one applicant we're not too sure about it, would you like to accept this person, so then I would go into this person's record and I would look at various bits, I mean I personally only really used to look at their personal statement, as I felt that was the most appropriate thing to make a judgement on."

She explained that she stepped in only in cases when there was ambiguity over the undergraduate grades achieved and how they translated into this institution's own benchmarks, or as indicated in this excerpt, in cases when the relevance of the undergraduate subject area to the postgraduate program applied for was unclear;



importantly, she stated that she was not asked to step in and offer insight on issues of language requirements, because “they had to have the language requirement or not; there was no maybe or not quite or whatever”.

The informant explained that each application received to this Master’s program is considered against the three criteria mentioned above, as well as other supporting documentation (e.g. references and personal statements); conditional offers may be made if a student still has to meet their language requirement.

"So every application that is received onto the website is monitored, it's filtered through them, and they will basically check the applications for its appropriacy if you like, and this involves as I mentioned earlier the academic backgrounds, or what degree do they have or what degree do they expect, more to the point, whether they come from that background if you like, and also whether they have the English requirement, in addition to other things like the number of references, and whether they have provided a statement. So they check all of this, and if they are satisfied, then they will offer an offer which will be conditional sometimes or most often it will be conditional because a lot of applicants apply when they are, for example, still studying or when they are expecting to get their results from their Bachelor's degree."

7.2 Use of test scores and other proficiency evidence

The informant was asked to reflect on the relationship between IELTS scores achieved, and her own evaluation of students’ proficiency levels. With specific reference to making comparisons between IELTS writing scores and personal statements submitted as part of the application, the informant explained that there are often substantial discrepancies between the two: a well-written personal statement was not necessarily indicative of a high IELTS Writing score, and vice versa. In her discussion of this relationship between stated IELTS Writing scores and other evidence of writing proficiency, it is very interesting to note that on occasions when this informant has been asked to review applications, she has tended to place more value on the content rather than the apparent level of accuracy in the language used.

"I wouldn't want to extrapolate necessarily from the language that they're writing in, I would extrapolate more from what they've written. So if it's a borderline case of someone who is perhaps missing a couple of percentage points towards their degree or whatever, but they make a very strong statement, even though it may be in kind of faulty English, I would accept them onto the program, because obviously what we understand as faulty English is kind of you know it's English, it's kind of their particular way of communicating, and as I said it doesn't really necessarily reflect on how they would approach any kind of academic writing task necessarily."

Linked to the above discussion, the informant talked in detail about prospective students who apply, citing other forms of language proficiency evidence for their preparedness to now study in the UK. This informant had an interesting perspective on this – she believed that students having previously studied through the medium of English may well be better prepared to thrive in the academic and wider setting, having likely acquired some understanding of the academic norms in a UK institution.

"Well I think what these people often have an advantage of is a knowledge of the education culture, and of the learning culture, and I think this is really– it makes a big difference in the way they can acclimatise themselves to what is happening here, if they haven't studied in [the UK], but they have studied let's say in Hong Kong and have studied in a university where English is the medium of instruction, then they're usually much more able to kind of you know shift their perspective, and kind of you know be part of that discourse."



Whereas if they come from mainland China, maybe even from a sort of non-municipal rural university setting perhaps, my understanding is because I have not had experience of that myself, my understanding is that it's a very, very different learning culture, and therefore it's not just about using English in their everyday learning, which can be difficult, but also just kind of dealing with the requirements or with the expectations if you like of what we as tutors have towards them, what the university as an institution has towards them, and how that often is not aligned to what they expected to find when they got here."

This stance on academic preparedness is somewhat coherent with that of TSU03-F, who linked this kind of readiness with having undertaken pre-sessional study (often on the basis of feedback from such students themselves). Here, TSU05-D connected greater academic preparedness with previous English-medium education experience. She elaborated on her point of view further:

"Language is not just a structural, what do you call it, system where you just kind of learn every bit of it, which is often what happens in a foreign language context, this is how you learn a language because that's kind of how it's presented, and it kind of makes sense I guess, you learn bits of it and then you put it somehow together. But obviously language is much more than that, it's about interaction, it's about the cultural contexts of it, and obviously in a sort of technical aspect of academic discourse, terminology must be unpicked, and it often yeah it's sort of querying attitudes towards what a word mean that's lacking if you just simply learnt long lists of vocabulary and said this is...and put it against a set meaning in your first language or whatever.."

So the whole attitude towards using language for meaning making, and also for a critical view on this meaning I think is perhaps quite foreign if someone just simply learned it as a system, and is just used to being tested on it through a right or wrong system as is the case with the IELTS, for example."

As can be seen here, the informant offered insight into the nature of language learning itself, and that taking a "critical" approach to this process can be hugely beneficial. Interestingly, she proposed that standardised tests such as IELTS perhaps encourage a less critical and less inquiring approach to language learning. Offering even further insight into her point of view, she explained that:

"[standardised tests] have a more sort of...synthetic view of language, and you... write your descriptors, and you have your construct of whatever you want to test, but this is a very kind of bounded construct, which it has to be to a degree because of the validity aspect of standardised testing; it's used on such a vast scale and for such a vast number of purposes. But then obviously the question that needs to be asked is if the IELTS or any other large-scale standardised test is not fit for this kind of purpose, what would be, and then there is shrugging, we don't really know, because it would mean really to kind of have a one-to-one individual assessment of candidates, which on the one hand would be perfect, because you could really pick those candidates you feel would contribute to the program, and this is how some programs choose their candidates...but we don't have this luxury and we don't have the time because of the numbers that are involved in that, and obviously also candidates don't have if they're international students don't have the ability to come on the off-chance, that they might come on to the program, they need some kind of guarantee that if they come here they will be able to come onto the program."



Overall, these excerpts offer interesting reflection on the nature of language itself, and related to this, processes of language learning, and of course, language testing as well. There is recognition from the informant that there are advantages and drawbacks both to standardised testing, and alternative forms of language evidence as entry requirements for an academic program; the overall sense seems to be that there is no correct or easy answer about how this should be approached.

7.3 Rationale for selection approach and practices

It has been outlined above how each application onto this postgraduate program is reviewed, according to the students' first degree, their personal statement, and the extent to which they meet the language requirement. It is done in this way, she explained, because of the very large number of applications the course receives every year. Justification was also given for raising and lowering IELTS scores as an entry requirement, which tends to be linked to goals in terms of student numbers, as we explore further in Section 7.4 below.

7.4 How language proficiency requirements are set

This informant has not been directly involved in the process of setting IELTS scores but was able to give some level of insight into the situation at her institution from meetings she had attended in her role as program director. The main point she conveyed was that across the university (in her understanding at least) there are very different practices in place – there is no consistent approach implemented. She believed that each program puts in place a system that is appropriate to that subject area.

"It seems [in this university] to me it's kind of quite a diverse way of doing it, and I think in some areas it's purely the program who come, you know, who have a meeting, have a few glasses of wine and come up with a number. In other areas, I think there are requirements that are set much higher up. So, for example, I think in medical studies or nursing studies, the requirements are quite high, and the reason I believe is to ensure safety of patients and that kind of thing, and I'm sure that perhaps the professional bodies may have had input in that as well so NHS and that kind of thing may have had some guidelines in that area. So I think it's quite a diverse way of arriving at a number, and again my impression is that it's quite a random number that's arrived at."

Further reflection into this process is offered, with comments about it often being somewhat arbitrary in nature, that is to say, there is perhaps a lack of nuanced understanding of what specific IELTS scores, and boundaries between them, actually mean.

"I mean as I said, I mean if you say 6 and then somebody says 6.5, I mean what's the actual difference? Other than 6.5 sounds a bit better or higher or more proficient if you like...So yeah to me it's a fairly heuristic kind of process, people just come up with a number that's either sort of traditional that they've experienced or heard of before, oh if this program has this number then maybe our program should have this number."

What is also interesting here is this notion of a comparative element coming into play in the process of score setting, that is to say, using other programs' or institutions' practices as a guide. With reference to the specific part of the university she finds herself in, this informant believed that often, decisions made about IELTS requirements for specific programs (and the comparative element within that) is driven by the aim of recruiting students.



"The translation of IELTS scores into numbers on programs – this connection is very strong, so I think any discussion that is taking place about what language requirements shall be set, has to do with what does that mean for recruitment, and I don't think in very many cases it has to do with what quality of person do we want. So what we talked about earlier these ideas of does the IELTS scores really predict kind of the ability the students have, and the problems that students are coming with, even though they fulfil the English language requirement, all these issues are something that is barely ever the concern at this point when the IELTS score is set, at least not vocally."

When asked explicitly whether the raising or lowering of IELTS score requirement is linked to student recruitment, she responded affirmatively, and provided the following detail:

"I know from a discussion that there are programs that are strongly against raising the IELTS for their program, because there was talk of doing it homogeneously across all programs, and the reason they were against it was because they were afraid that they'd lose some of their clientele. So yeah absolutely, and I think it is because it's something that's easiest to control from here, I mean we can't control what happens in those countries about Bachelor's degrees or about what topic they choose or whatever, but what we can control is this language requirement, so I think it's a very easy and efficient way if you like of controlling something that's often very kind of last minute yeah."

This excerpt raises interesting questions regarding the nature of the language test score as a requirement for entry, compared with the applicant's academic qualifications. While the latter is used as a more clear-cut indicator of whether an application should be accepted or rejected, the English language requirement operates as a mechanism for some degree of "control" over not only whether students can enter into the program, but also how they do so (e.g., if they need to embark on pre-sessional study, or re-take IELTS). This is also evidenced by the fact that the minimum score for entry can be raised or lowered year-on-year as a way of adjusting incoming student numbers as needed.

The discussion of the relationship between student recruitment and setting and changing English language proficiency requirements resonates with those in other case studies (Case Studies A and B).

7.5 Awareness and perceptions of guidance from IELTS Partners

When asked about the impression she holds regarding the awareness of IELTS Partner guidance (specifically among those whose work involves using IELTS scores), this informant expressed the view that in her work with such colleagues, she feels that such guidance is not used. Although she was only able to speak impressionistically, she believed that what is used to make decisions are the IELTS scores themselves, rather than anything that helps them to interpret them more broadly.

"Well, I think it would be useful, but I again think the point that...or the service given by these IELTS scores is that they mean you can deal effectively with a number and a very large number of applicants, so if you have to go into each individual case and really read into detail how to interpret things, then I think it would take too long and would be too much effort. I mean these people need to interpret transcripts from a variety of contexts, so I mean I'm guessing there is some training, and I'm guessing there may be some ideas about interpretation, but whether that's to do with the language requirement or with the transcripts only, that I wouldn't know, but I think they would definitely have to have some kind of idea how to interpret transcripts.



Whereas with the IELTS score is perhaps presented as this is the number and this is what you have to look for, you don't need to go beyond that."

In this excerpt, it can be seen that the informant reflected on whether it would be of benefit for this sort of guidance to be more emphasised among such decision-makers; ultimately she felt that there is a balance to be achieved between doing a thorough job of interpretation and understanding of IELTS scores, and being able to process the high numbers of applications that admissions officers receive.

The informant was asked to share her views about any recommendations she would like to make to the IELTS Partners to improve their practice. Her response focused largely on the possibility of creating a test which was designed expressly for students who were planning to embark on academic study.

"Well I think if they're really interested in that, then they should be looking into developing a test specifically for academic entrance onto a Master's program, and develop items that talk about skills that are needed on such programs, and that go far beyond writing a pro/con opposition essay for example, that kind of thing, so you know if they want to develop that, then I'm sure that may provide a better sense, and also would provide students with actually a better understanding of what they can expect. Because as I said I think a lot of the time it's just a lack of understanding of what they're required to do, and they feel I've done my IELTS, I've got good scores, and I've worked really hard..."

The underlying view was that current IELTS tests did not align particularly strongly with the actual skills that students were expected to deploy throughout their university study (but see the discussion in Case Study B regarding the need to differentiate between language proficiency and academic literacy as well as different developmental stages). This can often, she said, lead students to have a misconception of what is actually being asked of them during their program of study, as they mistakenly believe that it will be similar to what they are familiar with from having sat IELTS tests (that students can potentially over-interpret their IELTS score as indicative of full preparedness for academic study, is also raised by TSU06-B). She emphasised that there is value in a good IELTS score, in that it does indicate someone's potential for managing in the medium of English, but not necessarily their potential for deploying it in academic settings; despite this, she was keen to praise students nonetheless in the competence they often tend to possess in progressing through their studies.

"...I mean to be fair, we talk about weakness all the time, but a lot of the time I'm actually really amazed at how well they actually can use English as the language to talk about themselves and try and negotiate this kind of landscape of obstacles that is in front of them every single day of their life. So I think they really are very, very proficient in the way they use the language, I mean some make errors, some can't write very well, yeah ok that's just life I guess, so you know I do think someone with a good IELTS score that comes here is a good user of English.

But they may not be a good user of the particular type of discourse on which they will be assessed, which is a completely different matter, and I think this expectation or this understanding is not there, and by going maybe if we talk about washback, an assessment that alerts them to these kind of discourses they are expected to produce, will then tell them ok if I can do this well then I will be able to do it well on the program."



7.6 Views about good practice

What this informant hypothesised as good practice in the setting of IELTS scores was related to her discussion (outlined above) of the importance she perceived in there being a close relationship between IELTS and academic study; in this instance, she talked about how good practice for her would relate to ensuring coherence between IELTS scores and academic levels (e.g. “level 11” representing postgraduate study).

"Well, I mean it would be aligned with the descriptors of a particular score level, so for the IELTS, if you look at the descriptors for what does a 7 represent, and whether that 7 as explained matches a level 11 kind of skillset if you like, which arguably it doesn't, because level 11 is all about criticality, it's all about autonomy it's about these kinds of values, whereas level 7 just simply talks about proficiency of using certain language features. But it doesn't really talk about...to what purpose you would use them, obviously that's kind of— yeah arguably you would say that's difficult to put down into the construct, because you know it's not no longer something you would actually be assessing, but yeah so I think to me I think it's all a bit heuristic, it's not really something that's scientifically embedded in good enough data that kind of makes this a robust calculation, I think it's all rule of thumb kind of thing...

Arguably, you could say that there is a jump between level 6 and level 7 in the IELTS where perhaps the proficiency...you know there's a lot more about the competencies that are about you know control and yeah being sort of more independent in the sense of you know holding certain discourses in either written or spoken or understanding certain discourses, so it's still more on a broader level, so maybe that was the reason for that.

But these whole alignments of a score with a particular construct with a particular kind of ability and then that matched against a completely different set of descriptors of ability and then kind of aligning those to...I think it's more often than not it's more intuitive rather than an actual scientifically based thing, in my opinion."

Another relevant point she raised is issues of fairness and equity associated with standardised tests such as IELTS. She proposed that another way of approaching the process of vetting prospective students could be a “qualitative assessment of candidates” (which linked to the points she made above about the possible benefits of “a one-to-one individual assessment of candidates”), which she believed would be preferable in many ways, although she acknowledged there are drawbacks to such an alternative approach as well.

"The alternative would be using a more qualitative assessment of candidates or applicants onto a program, and I personally would welcome that, but it would actually, apart from the resource implications, it would perhaps also create other inequalities, it would create inequalities in terms of availability, it would be more about personality and the ability to kind of- selling yourself in an interview, which again is a particular skill isn't it? It's not just something that everyone possesses equally, even though they all have equal ability towards the aim that they're studying towards. So there will never be an absolute flawless and valueless, if you like, process, because it would also be biased, and we can just try and mitigate the bias as much as possible."

On the basis of the recognised challenges with this alternative approach, she then elaborated on the positives of the current process which centres around standardised test usage, tempered with the drawbacks nonetheless.

"So using a language test arguably could be such a thing, because it doesn't necessarily— it's often very clear what students have to do, so it's something that they can prepare themselves for, which they do obviously, but is it then—



how do we need to use the evidence, that's I think more to the point, is it just evidence— a tick box at the moment, it's a tick box but it's also a political kind of – what's the word – "ball", if you like, that's being thrown back and forth, because on the one hand, you have like pre-sessional programs who earn a lot of money themselves again by providing services for students who need to achieve a particular language level, and then you have this whole question of English medium education, what kind of— you know should we require students to let's put it out there should we require them to write a dissertation in English for example, should that be a requirement. Yeah, so it's a political discussion to a degree, rather than simply an administrative discussion."

As can be inferred from this excerpt, the elements that need to be weighed up when evaluating how best to make entry decisions about applicants to an academic program, and the role of language proficiency within this, is one that feeds into much wider ("political" suggested the informant) considerations that go beyond the mere administrative logistics.

8 Case study E

8.0 The admissions context

The admissions context in this case study is the pre-sessional English program within a Post-1992 Group university in the UK – the same university as Case Study A. This informant (TSU01-E) is the program coordinator supervising the pre-sessional offering at this institution, which runs throughout the year. She manages the EAP tutors and is someone that the EAP students can come to if they are facing any problems. Importantly, she also liaises with the admissions department if they require further advice about exactly where to place a student.

With specific focus on her role in admissions selection for students seeking to gain entry onto the EAP program, she explains that she uses the university guidelines in place to make decisions about placing students based on the IELTS scores they present with. This is often very straightforward, given the correspondence between EAP levels and IELTS scores, but it becomes slightly more complex in the case of students presenting with a "spiky" IELTS score. In such instances, this informant is required to support the admissions team in terms of making a decision on placement.

8.1 Admissions selection process and use of test scores

This informant outlined the approach taken to admissions in this EAP context: the courses run from level 1 to 4, and the overall IELTS score requirement for each level goes from 4.5 (for entry into level 1) to 6 (for entry into level 4). Minimum component scores exist – they are 0.5 lower than the overall score for each level; applicable to all four skills at level 1, and to Reading and Writing only at levels 2–4. Moving from one level to another typically takes 12 weeks. This structure tends to be quite straightforward to apply, but as noted above, students who present with "spiky" IELTS scores cannot so easily be placed into one of these levels. The informant's explanation as to how these cases are approached was as follows:

"I look at, well, first of all, which skill is it that is so weak, and if it's the Writing skill, then I'm inclined to go for a lower level. If it's a speaking skill that is fairly low, then I'm inclined to go for a higher level."



In terms of correspondence between EAP exit and academic program entry, the percentage grade achieved at the end of an EAP level determines whether entry onto a UG or PG program is possible, based on the understanding that each level 1–4 corresponds to an IELTS score. There was a recent increase in the percentage needed (up to 60%, at the end of level 2) for students to enter a pre-masters diploma, based on a belief that students passing the pre-sessionals with lower grades and progressing onto this program of study were not sufficiently proficient to cope with it. Students now need to achieve 60% overall, and they “cannot go low on any of the skills”, particularly Reading and Writing. For any students with 60% overall but a low component score, it remains the decision of the department whether they should be admitted. It should be noted that students achieving the requisite grade at the end of their EAP course means that it is not necessary for them to re-sit IELTS at this point.

Apart from IELTS, it is in theory, admissible for students to present with scores from other standardised language tests (e.g. TOEFL), but this seems a rare occurrence that this informant has not had experience of it herself – it tends to be IELTS as a default. The dominance of IELTS in this role is explicitly linked to government visa regulations. In addition, the informant mentioned being aware that students from particular (majority English-speaking) countries are exempt from submitting language proficiency test scores:

"We do have students who come from ex-British colonies, so their L1 isn't English but they were educated in English. So I suppose they're different in that they don't need to have IELTS."

As noted above, there is a relatively straightforward relationship between IELTS scores and entry onto one of the four EAP course levels. Furthermore, the informant expressly stated that IELTS scores are used “as a screening criterion” for entry onto these courses. Although she did not have direct experience of how the admissions process works for students' entry onto their academic programs, and cannot therefore be sure, she considered it likely that applicants' academic qualifications are taken into account first, before language proficiency evidence.

The informant discussed the extent to which she engages with academic departments on the relationship between students' IELTS or pre-sessionals assessment scores, and how they perform on, and cope with, the requirements of the academic program of study. While this engagement is not necessarily extensive, the informant reported that one academic department fed back their understanding that many students coming through the pre-sessionals route were not doing particularly well, and that it is students' listening skills which appear to be the main problem.

"Yeah, we've had a couple of meetings with departments. We don't get a lot of feedback, but one example has been about business students, about students who progress from pre-sessionals weren't doing well – not all, but many were struggling. But students admitted through IELTS scores also struggle."

"One skill that the business department complained about that surprised me was listening. Students couldn't follow what was being said in lectures. I found that interesting."

As mentioned by the informant, it is her understanding that students entering their academic programs directly with an IELTS score do also struggle, which seems to indicate that there is not a substantial difference between students coming via these two routes to their academic program of study.



However, she acknowledged that without concrete evidence on students' route and performance, such claims can only be impressionistic. A tracking system has recently been implemented, but this is a substantial job fraught with logistical difficulties. This is currently being worked on, but the tracking system remains being in its preliminary stage, and have yet to yield any indicative findings.

Feedback from students who have completed the pre-sessional program presents a different, more positive view, according to the informant:

"We get a lot of feedback from students who have done the pre-sessional course and they say they valued the input that they had; sometimes they had an advantage against other students who were admitted on their IELTS score, because they knew more about how to do things."

It is interesting to reflect on this in light of TSU05-D (Case Study D), who also discussed the preparedness for study of students coming from different routes. TSU05-D expressed a belief that those who have already been exposed to English-medium study are likely to be more ready and "acclimatised" to embarking upon their study in academic programs in the UK.

In general, the minimum IELTS score requirement for students' entry to their academic program is an overall 6.0. With component scores, there is an emphasis on the importance of Reading and Writing skills. There would be some "leeway" if a student had an overall 6.0, but was weaker in Listening and Speaking – the student may well be granted admission in such a case. The necessity of students gaining a 6.0 in Reading and Writing is communicated to prospective students to ensure they are aware of this requirement, at the point that an offer is made. If they do not achieve these scores in these two skills, then they would have to attend a pre-sessional program (with occasional exceptions – see Case Study A).

8.2 Rationale for selection approach and practices

In terms of the rationale for IELTS being used almost exclusively as language proficiency evidence for admissions, the informant expressed a belief in the appropriacy of IELTS specifically for this role of gauging students' proficiency levels, more so than other standardised language tests. Not only did she state that it is the most suited for this purpose in terms of its content, but she also expressed a belief in the importance of it being commonly utilised in other institutions. Although she acknowledged that the test is not perfect, she upheld IELTS as being the best approach to gauging (even approximately) a student's language skills.

"It works for us because IELTS is based on some kind of academic skills, you know, the tasks that they have are similar, so in that sense it does give us a sense of what that student can do. So in that sense it works. I don't know of any other qualification that would do the same thing, like if we ask for, I don't know, Cambridge exam or anything like that, although I'm sure you can get into the university with a Cambridge proficiency something like that. Again it's still not that same, and then again not as widely used. And I think, again, I'm not sure about this, but they tried using an Oxford placement test a long time ago to admit students, and for some reason that did not work. It just did not, don't know why."

"When I think about it, it sort of works. I mean not always, I wouldn't say it's fool-proof, like a hundred percent if the IELTS says 5.5 then this person is 5.5, but it does give you a general guideline roughly you can estimate how good that student is."



So I think once they started this system, that they could see whoever started the system that it roughly measured the skills that we were interested in, and that we wanted to take them further on."

Within this context, the informant reported not being explicitly aware of an internationalisation agenda – at least not one that impacts on the work she does or processes in place in the EAP department.

"Not that I know of, especially because when I think about it, our pre-sessional cohort is generally quite small, so they don't bank on all these international students. It's there as a service. They don't capitalise on *oh we can have all these international students*."

This contrasts with the work of the recruitment and admissions teams in the same university (see Case Study A), where there is a strategy and specific targets for recruitment of international students onto UG and PG programs. As the informant TSU01-E highlighted here, however, within the EAP program, the lack of an explicit internationalisation agenda is linked to the small numbers of international students within the pre-sessional program, and that the EAP support is seen as a "service".

8.3 Reviews and changes in the use of test scores

To the knowledge of this informant, no academic department has raised their language entry requirements in recent years, although some have lowered it:

"The only changes I'm aware of are, for example, certain departments lowering their entry requirement. I don't think any department has upped it. I haven't heard of that."

The main change she was able to comment on is one internal to her own EAP department – among the foundation, the pre-sessional and the pre-master's programs. In response to the feedback from the head of the pre-master's program about pre-sessional students struggling with transitioning onto the next stage of EAP program, the required score for progression was increased.

"...so the three courses, we do discuss our progression. That's why this change was made – because the head of the pre-master's department said *we've been struggling with some of your students*, so I said *ok, let's have a look at our requirements to progress onto your program*."

8.4 How language proficiency requirements are set

The informant explained that a previous individual in this subject coordinator role was responsible for establishing the minimum score requirements for entry onto the EAP courses, and this took place roughly a decade ago. This informant was not able to offer any insight into how departments go about setting minimum IELTS scores for entry onto their programs.

8.4.1 Link between scores and length of pre-sessional

The specific links between a particular IELTS for UKVI band score and the length of the pre-sessional program required was set years ago prior to this informant taking up the coordinator role. However, she explained how the system works as follows:

"It is set 36 weeks here, because our courses are 12 weeks. So basically if you enter level 1 with a 4.5 – whoever decided that back then – so if you have a 4.5, and you want to enter a course that requires a 6, then you do 12 weeks here [level 1], then 12 weeks here [level 2], and then another 12 weeks here [level 3]."



Researcher: So, is there some sort of an assumption that after 12 weeks the IELTS score would go 0.5 up?

"Yeah. Well, it can go up 1 point. It can go from 4.5 to 5.5 if it is a 60% [score in the course's final assessment]. So it goes up a whole band if it's 60% [... and 0.5 if it's 50%]."

It was unclear to this informant exactly how the percentage score in the end-of-course assessment and its equivalence with IELTS band score progression was determined – as this is a practice inherited from her predecessors. However, she reinforced that the 60% mark is a relatively reliable indicator of the students' readiness for progression onto the next level or to academic programs.

"Actually, that usually works. If a student passes with a 60%, they have a fairly solid language level I find. If somebody's around 50–55%, I'd say "mm hmm" [be hesitant], but a 60% is actually a pretty good estimate of the ability of that student."

8.5 Awareness and perceptions of guidance from IELTS Partners

This informant stated that she was not currently aware of IELTS guidance, but agreed that it could be useful to engage with such guidance. Specifically, she stated that knowing more about IELTS assessors' marking procedures, and having more explanation about the meaning and rationale behind various IELTS scores, could be helpful for her. When asked to elaborate on the latter point, she gave the following explanation which demonstrates the link between the two points raised:

"Well, I just find that sometimes it's not consistent, you know, so sometimes an IELTS 5 for one student, that student does not have the same standard or level of English as another one with an IELTS 5. So there are discrepancies, and I don't know where that comes from – whether it comes from the assessor who assessed them, or there's something in the guidelines that allows the you know sort of discrepancy, so I don't know."

8.6 Views about good practice

When asked on her views as to what constitutes good practice in processes surrounding minimum scores setting and admissions, the informant responded first of all by talking about awareness among admissions officers tasked with using IELTS scores to make admissions decision. She recommended that admissions staff should have more of a grasp of what IELTS scores actually represent, rather than just seeing them as a decontextualised number.

"I think they should know what is behind, because what I find is often when they contact me – ok, right, this student has this test score, what do we do, so I send them a little paragraph about like, ok, because it's the Speaking skill, it means that it might be a pronunciation issue, and that's ok because they might better that when they come here, or because it's a writing skill, that it's really... So I try to explain what's behind the IELTS scores really... so for them it's just a number. They see it's only a 4.5 and it should be a 5."

The informant saw value in more interaction between the admissions team and the EAP team, especially where there is uncertainty about what a score represents – the EAP staff would be able to offer advice and expertise in interpreting IELTS scores to help the admissions officers make an informed decision.



She also commented on instances where IELTS scores for entry onto pre-sessional programs are lowered, in order to increase the numbers of students admitted. The informant was aware of this happening at other institutions. She outlined her beliefs about why this is a negative practice, and one to be avoided:

"Well I don't think it's right, I don't think it should be done because, at the end of the day, the student will suffer if they're not up to scratch when it comes to doing their courses. And also all those tutors, lecturers, you know, who have students who cannot write or cannot listen, you know, do not have the right ability, I think that sort of lowers the standard of the whole university, and that's not right...From what I gather, it was just that, well I suppose in some ways, one way to get students onto your courses, is to allow them at a lower score, and then they repeat the same course again and then they go onto another course and the next course and the next course, maybe just keeping the student by allowing them to come in at a lower score."

Apart from awareness of admissions personnel and practices in setting minimum requirements, the informant also reflected on the relationship between the students' language proficiency and their performance in academic programs. Specifically, she commented on how a student's ultimate academic success does not only depend on their IELTS score (or indeed the score they achieve on exiting the pre-sessional program), but also – and perhaps even more importantly – by their “academic attitude” (with some parallels to the notion of “academic literacy”). She proposed that such “academic attitude” may explain how students presenting with similar IELTS scores actually end up performing quite differently in their studies:

"Maybe it's not just the language level. Sometimes I find that it's not just the language level that we should be looking at, but also that academic attitude to studies... how motivated they are, and if they have that mindset, that academic mindset – because I find if they have the academic mindset, then they can learn the language much more quickly and they can perform better."

She admitted that “academic attitude” is hard to test for, or to know in advance of students arriving at the university. Nonetheless, she did maintain the importance of acknowledging a student's attitude in this sense, and indeed how university staff can sometimes confound academic ability with language proficiency, as there is inevitable interaction between the two.

"I think it would be useful to know – it would be really useful, but I don't know what we would do with it...As a language program, our task is not to judge them based on their academic ability. It's up to the department of the program that they go onto, to sort of judge them on their academic ability. The only problem is, I think, that sometimes language level is very much, sort of, it overlaps with the academic ability. Sometimes the language level is not too bad, but because there is nothing behind, like in the thought processes...the student doesn't perform well. And sometimes, I think departments may mistake it for language inadequacy, but I don't think it always is."

This issue of language proficiency as it interacts with academic literacy was referenced also in Case Studies B and D.

9 Case study F

9.0 The admissions context

The admissions context in this case study is the pre-sessional EAP program at a 1994 Group university. The informant's (TSU03-F) job title is EAP lecturer, and her responsibility extends to year-round EAP programs. These programs are set at modules A–D (A being the lowest; IELTS 4 is required for entry to A). Students are expected to see a 0.5 increase in their IELTS scores as they move from module to module, with the exception of moving from C to D, where a full point increase is expected. Students' outcomes in module D in terms of their IELTS scores determine whether they are then able to enter onto their intended program of academic study. Entry into the pre-sessional program is determined by IELTS scores, or in-house tests.

9.1 Admissions selection process and use of test scores

For admissions onto these pre-sessional courses, it is predominantly IELTS scores that are required, although pre-sessional students who are not subject to the same visa requirements may enter a level A–D on the basis of having completed an in-house test (the development of this in-house test pre-dates the informant, but she did question whether it is an exact equivalent of IELTS). The in-house test (consisting of grammar, speaking and writing assessment) is used in the following instances.

"We have an in-house test for student visitor visas, students generally who don't have IELTS, quite often, not always but often, spouses things like that, they're on sometimes spouse visas. We also take a number of refugees, and they almost always come in through our placement tests, in-house tests entry tests. Yes but all Tier-4 obviously all Tier-4 would come in via IELTS."

The informant pointed out that students' progression from module to module is not always "linear", as the program structure would perhaps suggest. As noted above, entry into module A requires an IELTS score of 4 (or equivalent); currently, there are no minimum component scores in place (although see Section 9.6 below for discussions that are taking place about possible upcoming changes in this regard).

Students who do not manage to achieve an overall score of IELTS 4 would simply not be able to join the EAP program, as this would mean that they have not met the minimum requirement for entry into module A – there is not any leniency or flexibility applied in such instances. It should be noted that the same is true for students who seek entry into the EAP program without an IELTS score (typically, non-Tier 4 visa students); if these students fall below a certain mark in the in-house placement test they sit, then similarly they will not be admitted onto module A.

9.2 Use of test scores and other proficiency evidence

The informant explained that of the available standardised test scores, it does tend to be IELTS which is used for decision-making about entry to the EAP program, although in theory, evidence from other types of tests would be acceptable. As noted above, the overall IELTS score is used to determine which EAP module level a student should enter (i.e. A–D); component scores only come into play when it comes to making a decision about which specific class within a module is suitable.

She also considered how a student's IELTS score can be inconsistent with EAP teachers' evaluations of their proficiency, and that, in her view, this could be one factor which potentially explains the difficulties a student may encounter as they attempt to progress through the EAP module structure, and indeed as they embark upon their program of academic study.



When asked to reflect on any alternative approaches to standardised test scores as evidence taken for entry onto the EAP program, the informant discussed situations which are tangential to her own role but apply to admissions onto academic programs more generally. She discussed instances where she may be contacted by staff in other subject areas throughout the university to offer support in interpreting alternative language proficiency evidence that a student is presenting in their application. Examples she gave are as follows:

"that might be that the person has actually worked in the UK for a number of years, or that they have, yeah, like a non-standard English test, or maybe they've got like an international baccalaureate or something like that, rather than...or they're just things that the admissions department– in the academic department aren't familiar with. So it would come to us and we would then decide, and sometimes we would ask for more evidence, so we would ask to see maybe a high school transcript, for example if they went to high school in you know like, I don't know Hong Kong or something, and they were taught in English, like we would want to see evidence of that. Or we might ask for their CV, or just ask them to do a piece of writing or something like that. So those types of situations happen and we assist in those cases...But for our entry onto pre-sessionals, we are pretty...pretty gatekeeper-y."

This excerpt demonstrates, therefore, that there is some degree of difference in the flexibility permitted in terms of different kinds of proficiency evidence, comparing entry onto pre-sessional programs (which is more strictly aligned to standardised test scores) and entry onto academic programs (where a greater range of evidence may be presented and considered, for which an EAP professional is consulted in this institution).

In this admissions context, an IELTS (or another SELT) score alone is sufficient as well as necessary as evidence for entry onto the EAP program (that is to say, the IELTS score is not used in conjunction with any other evidence in order to inform decision-making about entry). Furthermore, scores presented as evidence for entry must be obtained in one attempt – it is not accepted evidence for entry to take a specific skills score from one test sitting, and another from an additional sitting; nor is it possible for an applicant to take evidence from one standardised test (e.g. IELTS) and amalgamate it with evidence from another standardised test (e.g. TOEFL).

In a similar vein, the only evidence used to evaluate a student's readiness to move from one EAP module to the next is the in-house proficiency tests, which theoretically are aligned with IELTS score levels, although (as alluded to above) the accuracy of this assumed correspondence is unclear.

This broad principle also holds for how non Tier-4 students (i.e., typically those without IELTS scores) are admitted, or not, onto the EAP program; the evidence used to make entry decisions in these cases again comes down to proficiency scores, this time the in-house tests rather than IELTS.

9.3 Rationale for selection approach and practices

The rationale given for taking only an IELTS score as evidence for entry into the EAP program is linked to fairness and consistency in terms of the official UKVI requirements for Tier-4 students. The informant explained that it would not seem "valid" to put in place any other evidence measures in addition to IELTS scores. In terms of the rationale for using IELTS itself as a deciding factor in terms of EAP program entry, the informant linked this approach to both government (i.e., the requirements that students must meet in order to obtain a Tier-4 visa) and institutional requirements (i.e. certain IELTS scores are required for entry onto an academic program), which in turn she linked to IELTS' status as a globally acknowledged standardised measure of language proficiency.



"In total we probably have about 800 students in the summer, and in order to...get those students onto the courses...we just use our normal routes. So yes, it's just IELTS or if they're non Tier 4 then other methods, and I'm pretty sure that there is no nuance in it because the feeling is there's no need to be any like, you don't have to be any more detailed or nuanced than that. The standard English language test is already out there, and you either trust its reliability or you don't."

She also discussed the relevance of the number of students who attend the pre-session programs in total, and that this impacts on how her team is able to make decisions about entry (a recurrent theme in Case Studies B and D too); ultimately, a relatively efficient approach to try to ensure appropriate decisions are made.

9.4 How language proficiency requirements are set

9.4.1 Correspondence between IELTS score and length of pre-session

This informant reported a lack of knowledge of the minutiae of how specific IELTS scores correspond to entry requirements onto the pre-session, as many such decisions were made before she took up this role; it is a system she implements, but its origins and rationale are not always known. She wondered whether much of the decision-making based around the relationship between the length of EAP program and the IELTS score that is set for entry was done based on alignment with other institutions' practices, rather than through an in-depth reflection and understanding on the accuracy of this relationship.

"I imagine they looked at what another university was doing and said *that seems about right*, but maybe I'm wrong, maybe there was a big project I don't know."

When asked, however, she tried to work through the assumed logic, using as her starting point the fact that students are expected to complete module D to reach a level equivalent to an IELTS 6.5 (given that it is the entry requirement for most academic programs at this institution). This led to her identifying the slight inconsistency in terms of intended progress students should undergo throughout the series of EAP modules, as she explained in detail:

"...it must start from the entry scores required for admission onto academic programs at the end of module D, so most academic programs need an IELTS 6.5. Why are they 10-week courses? I don't know. Why is the entry requirement for their course 6.5 and the entry requirement for module D 5.5, whereas in every other 10-week program it goes up half a point, so you've got module A, 4, module B, 4.5, they're all 10-week courses, and then, all of a sudden, students are expected to go from 5.5 on module D to 6.5 at the end of module D, so why isn't it a whole? Why isn't that half an IELTS point? Because we wouldn't get any students I expect."

The final point made here about the relationship between IELTS requirements and student numbers indicates that lower entry requirements likely correlate to higher student numbers. The potential impact of this inconsistency, the informant later explained, is somewhat tempered by the fact that for the many students who enter the program directly at module D (i.e., students who have not gone through modules A–C), the nature of the system in terms of progress points that is in place in lower levels (that they did not do) is irrelevant to them.



9.4.2 Awareness and perceptions of guidance from IELTS Partners

From this informant, it appeared that there is little or no awareness of advice provided by the IELTS Partners on how entry requirements can be set; furthermore, she was unaware of how or where she would be able to locate such information:

"No. I can ask someone else if they are! Where would I find that advice?"

When it was suggested that the sorts of guidance available might link to questions such as what a certain IELTS score "means", this led to a brief reflection of the challenges associated with trying to pin this down.

9.4.3 Reviewing the entry requirement and progression points

At the time of the interview, one change currently being discussed was the possible benefit of introducing minimum component scores.

"We're looking at having potentially a minimum component score in place, and this is for two reasons...students who start on module A and go through quite often don't make it to the end of module D. So this idea that students learn at a linear rate, that they always hit their IELTS, you know that they're learning in this kind of step fashion, is just not true. Quite often we find that they struggle, and we're doing research to find out if the students who do struggle at the end of the 40-week program, are they the students who come in with a lower- like a very spiky IELTS profile?"

The informant explained that another possible change is that the current "progression points" which are in place for students to move up from module to module could be removed in the first twenty weeks of the EAP program, given her belief that this fallacy associated with the notion of "linear progression" is particularly true in these early stages. It is her stance that should this measure be introduced, in conjunction with minimum component scores, then student numbers may decrease, but success rates may increase.

9.5 Pre-sessional assessment and progression onto academic programs

Much detail is provided about the processes of assessing students' language proficiency throughout the various modules of the pre-sessional program. Of particular interest is the fact that procedures in module D (i.e. the module leading into students' program of academic study) is notably different to modules A–C, both in terms of alignment to IELTS assessment (less so in D than the lower levels), and also in terms of the way grades are awarded to students. The rationale given for the different approach to assessment was that, on module D, it has been designed with the intention of providing students with preparation and familiarisation in terms of the kinds of skills and practices they will encounter when they do embark on their program of study.

The informant offered the following detailed outline:

"I think there is a feeling that not ultimate authenticity but they should be using the skills that have been taught on the course and the reason they've been taught on the course is because these are the skills they'll need to use on their future courses. So for example, the writing test is a reading into writing, they get the reading text the day before the test, they go home memorise huge chunks of it, paraphrase it, memorise it, anyway, usually there are four short pieces of text, all about one topic, the student doesn't know what questions are going to come, so when they go to the test, they get the question and they have to use the text to support their answer. So the reading is very different to IELTS. [Whereas module] A, B, C is very similar to IELTS."



"The listening is a lecture, it's very similar to other places, then it's a more detailed listening. Speaking is supposed to be like a seminar but it's not, it's just a discussion really, and the writing test is... oh no no no the reading test itself, sorry that was the writing test, the reading into writing; the reading test itself, yes, it is different because it's not multiple choice... I haven't seen an IELTS Reading test for ages... you know paraphrase parts and it's much...there's a lot in it, I think. We did a lot of work on reading test specs and there's a lot on relationship between ideas like causal relationships and stuff like that as well as just kind of comprehension stuff. So they do they look like IELTS tests? No, I don't think they do."

The explanation provided for the different grading system is to make it more straightforward to interpret for others in the university, outside the EAP department, who are involved with using these scores at the point of students' admission to their academic program:

"Originally it was done because they thought it would be easier for admissions officers at the university to understand, so instead of saying the student is referred, we're waiting, or saying the student's passed all five skills or whatever, when you have a number attached to the average, a number that looks like an IELTS score. So, at the end of module D now, a student could score 50, which is terrible, 55 which is pretty bad, 60 which is fine, unless it's entry 6.5, they can score 65, 70 or 75, and essentially the idea is that, for admissions officers to go *oh that looks like an IELTS 7, or 6.5*. So, it was a way of making it more accessible for the university admissions team. And confusingly for an outsider, we still use the old system on module A, B and C."

One further noteworthy point raised by the informant was her reflection on the interactivity between the EAP department's own assessment procedures, and those of IELTS. She explained that if a student does not obtain the required grade in the departmental assessment for module D, they are nonetheless free to then (re-)sit IELTS, in order to attempt to achieve the desired grade through that mechanism. That students are able to do so "makes a mockery" of module D, in this informant's opinion.

9.6 Views about good practice

When asked to comment about what she considered to be good practice in using language test scores for admissions purposes, this informant talked a lot about the pros and cons related to using minimum component scores. For example, she reflected on the possible message this sends to students about one specific language skill being more important or valuable than another. She also talked about whether there would be a benefit in having another layer of language testing for ensuring appropriate placement of a student in the pre-sessional modules, rather than only relying on the IELTS score that they present as evidence.

"I think it's interesting when departments have minimum component score in certain skills because it means that you are valuing those skills over others, so often it'll be Writing, I think, for certain pre-sessional departments, so entry onto the pre-sessional is dependent on you for example, having- it's an entry level 6 course, and you have to have a 6 in Writing. So I don't know what that says about how valid the other skills are to that student for example, and how writing is prized more highly than the other skills. I don't know if that has an eventual impact on the way the student sees the make-up of those kind of skills and their English, I don't know; do I think it's bad practice though, no, not really... I find it odd that you would choose..."

I prefer personally to try and eradicate, or do I, I don't know, this super spiky IELTS profile. But then you get students who actually are very good in certain areas and not in others for whatever reason; it doesn't mean that they're any less likely to be able to cope with their university course. Maybe ours is bad practice, I don't know, maybe having some kind of blanket: *yeah-yeah you've got an IELTS certificate, come on the course*, because there's no secondary screening, you can't say to a student: *oh you've got IELTS 5, but actually two weeks into the course, you're not the right level*. If they've got the certificate, they've got the certificate; [that] is how we think of it, so maybe that's bad practice."

"I'm just wondering if there should be an additional selection process at pre-session level, and I think no actually because we are not...we are merely transporters, so we are transporting the student from some official gatekeeping place, we're transporting them on this journey, hoping that their English will improve enough so that they can then get through the other gatekeeping place and onto their course; so we're not- I would say we're not responsible...that's not true, we're responsible, but we are not, we have no agency I don't think in terms of...I don't think we do, I think we're just supporting two sides of it. So I don't know is the answer! I don't know what good practices are and bad practices. I just know what we do, which seems to be just supporting what's already there, a system that already exists I think."

This excerpt offers an interesting perspective on the positioning of language support within the overall academic experience of a student, that it feeds into the wider university structure. It is worth noting that there was a sense from this informant that she and her department do not have agency in changing the structure that exists, rather they provide the best support they can within the constraints that are in place.

10 Discussion

In this section, we will discuss salient themes across the six admissions contexts (Case Studies A–F) in light of the two research questions we posed at the outset.

RQ1. How are IELTS scores used in admissions selection in the UK universities sampled in this study?

RQ2. How are minimum IELTS score(s) set as part of admissions requirements in the UK universities sampled in this study?

The discussion will bring together key findings from the case studies and insights from the panel discussion that reflected on these findings and their implications. References will also be made to the *BALEAP Guidelines on English Language Tests for University Entry* (BALEAP, 2020), which could offer a useful additional perspective as a practical guidance document drawn up based on the expertise of EAP specialists, independent of language test providers, and with receiving institutions as its target readership.

10.1 How are IELTS scores used in admissions selection

10.1.1 The role of test scores as language proficiency evidence

Across the six admissions contexts in this study, there is an English language proficiency requirement for admission to university. Predominantly, this requirement is met through language test scores, and, to a lesser extent, through evidence of prior English-medium study completed in countries on a list specified by the government and/or the institution.



While statistical information on actual numbers of students admitted through the different pathways is beyond the scope of this study, the views of admissions staff over the relative status of language test scores and prior English-medium study (and other forms of proficiency evidence) are of interest.

It is noteworthy that the admissions staff who feature in our case studies tended to prioritise test scores as the primary form of evidence. This is perhaps partly attributable to their prevalence as the main form evidence supplied by prospective students. Nonetheless, it is apparent that test scores are the first, default consideration: informant TSU04-C spoke of "waiving" a language test score when certain conditions are met, e.g., the applicant having completed an English-medium degree within two years. Other forms of evidence are brought in either when test scores have not become available or to moderate or supplement test scores (see Section 10.1.2 below), although "the test is still the most important thing" (TSU04-C). An interesting, contrasting perspective was proffered by panel members, where one participant (F03) raised the point that, for postgraduate admissions, an English-medium degree would be an *alternative* rather than an "additional" or 'back-up' form of evidence. One of the IELTS Partner representatives (F05) even argued that it is IELTS which should be seen as the alternative when other evidence of English-medium study is not available:

"Well, technically, it's almost the other way round. The question being asked is the candidate able, through the medium of English, to do what we need them to do. If they've studied in English language school and they've got a proper [A-level qualification], then the fact that they can use English is more or less established. So it's not that you would accept that in lieu of an IELTS qualification. The IELTS qualification is what you ask of those people who don't have an evidentiary base for their English language ability to begin with."

A comment by TSU05-D (a postgraduate program director) echoed this view, observing that those students with English-medium UG degrees seem to adjust better to the demands of their degree programs.

One possible explanation, among others (explored below), for the perceived primacy of test scores as language proficiency evidence by admissions officers is their trustworthiness. As we have seen, especially in case studies where admissions staff are involved (e.g. TSU04-C, TSU06-B), confidence in test security and thus the authenticity of the test scores and the transparency of the administrative procedures through which they are generated underpin their acceptability as evidence. Alternative forms of proficiency evidence may lack the familiarity and credibility of IELTS scores (see below).

In light of the findings from previous studies (e.g. Banerjee, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2011), we also explored whether and how flexibility is exercised in using test scores in admissions selection. Several case study contexts yielded accounts of flexibility in accepting test scores. The overall picture that emerged was that flexibility exists mainly around sub-scores of the language test (i.e., individual component scores for the four language skills), and occasionally in relation to alternative forms of evidence (i.e., prior English-medium study qualifications) accepted in some admissions contexts. According to TSU02-A, it is mainly motivated by institutional imperatives around student recruitment, with the diversity of international students' backgrounds cited as justification (for an overall more flexible approach to evaluating evidence against admissions criteria) in the context of Case Study A. Flexibility is moderated by visa requirements, for example:

- when Tier 4 visas were introduced in 2008 (Vine, 2012), there were changes to the list of majority English-speaking countries from which English-medium study qualifications would be accepted, as in Case Study B
- changes to the student visa system in 2015 (British Council, n.d.) involved the introduction of a score requirement for entry onto pre-sessional English programs, as in Case Studies E and F.



As reported in one of the central admissions contexts (Case Study A), the "bottom line" in relation to sub-scores is that they have to meet the CEFR B2 UKVI minimum visa requirement, i.e., no less than 5.5 for entry into degree programs. Informants from two admissions contexts (Case Studies A and C) also reported institutional decisions not to accept two sub-scores falling short by 0.5. In the departmental admissions context in Case Study C, applicants falling short by 0.5 in one sub-score are given an in-house assessment by the language centre, offering a "second chance" to students but also serving as a second form of gatekeeping.

10.1.2 Other forms of language proficiency evidence

We were interested in whether, how and when language proficiency evidence other than test scores might be used in admissions decision-making. It emerged that, in a departmental postgraduate admissions context (Case Study C), other forms of evidence such as students' writing (in English) on their application forms (for example, about their previous study of the subject) is used before test scores become available. This is used as an initial assessment of language proficiency, as well as forming part of the evaluation of the overall strength of the application. As part of this overall process, admissions officers appear to rank or categorise applications crudely in light of the places available. Other forms of language proficiency evidence, such as other examples of applicants' own writing or referees' evaluations, may also be considered together with test scores and can result in an application being put 'on hold' even if the applicant meets the minimum score requirement (Case Study C). Alternatively, as in the context of Case Study A, previous qualifications can be used as evidence in favour of the applicant if their test scores fall slightly short of the minimum requirement.

A related theme concerned whether and how other forms of language proficiency evidence may be used as "positive" or "negative" evidence. Notably, the value of personal statements as credible positive evidence in favour of accepting an applicant was questioned because their authorship and the circumstances under which they were written could not be verified. However, personal statements are used as negative evidence to moderate or contest what test scores indicate – a practice that emerged as a characteristic of departmental postgraduate admissions contexts (Case Studies C and D) but not institutional undergraduate admissions contexts (Case Studies A and B) where personal statements played only a peripheral role in admissions decision-making.

The wider question, of course, is: *Should other forms of language proficiency evidence be used, and how?* From the perspective of admissions decision-making, a panel member (F03) advanced the view that the more evidence, the better picture it gives of the prospective student's proficiency. The use of other language proficiency evidence in conjunction with test scores aligns with the advice given in BALEAP's guidelines on test score use for university admissions:

It is, thus, important that all test users develop a degree of understanding of the relationship between test purpose, format and the meaning of test scores in order to set and apply realistic and fair standards.

For the most part, this comes down to knowing what tests can and cannot do and considering how language test scores should be used in conjunction with other evidence to enhance the dependability of admissions decisions. (BALEAP, 2020, p.3)

One of the IELTS Partner representatives (F05) expressed the view that, while IELTS is a free-standing evaluation of English proficiency, admissions staff would not be discouraged from taking account of all evidence available. This view is consistent with the idea, expressed by TSU03-F, an EAP program coordinator, that using a single test score to interpret students' English proficiency without secondary screening could



occasionally result in a discrepancy between a student's IELTS score and their observed performance on the pre-sessional program (a similar issue was raised also by TSU01-E). Another useful consideration might be the time validity of the proficiency evidence. According to one of the IELTS Partner representatives (F06), they would encourage admissions staff to take account of additional evidence if the IELTS scores submitted are more than two years old. While the issue around time validity of test scores did not feature in any of the case studies, the validity of prior English-medium study from "10, 15 years ago" being used as evidence of an applicant's current proficiency was questioned by TSU06-B (Case Study B). Some admissions contexts, in fact, have formal rules governing the time validity of English-medium prior degrees as a form of language proficiency evidence, as we have seen in Case Study C.

The practicalities of using other forms of evidence in conjunction with test scores is one of the most pertinent issues here. F03's remark encapsulates the various considerations:

"It's an issue of practicalities, you know, if you have the manpower to do that then, yeah, why not? If there are more forms of evidence that give you a better picture of that individual's proficiency, why would you not look across them? Although that raises other complications in terms of...how you weigh one form of evidence against the others, and do that consistently? But yeah, I mean, in principle, I would think that the more forms of evidence, the better sense you get of that individual's capabilities...but it is about the practicalities involved and the time."

Whether definitive, quantitative weighting of different forms of evidence is appropriate and feasible probably varies from one context to another and is subject to local decision-making. However, as raised in the panel discussion, the labour and time resources required, the need to ensure consistency and to make the weighting or evaluation mechanisms transparent to applicants are also important considerations (perhaps hurdles) in bringing other forms of language proficiency evidence to bear on the admissions decision-making process, and would seem to put test scores back on the table as the favoured option, as they seem to provide both trustworthiness and practicality.

10.1.3 Test score as sole evidence or part of holistic evaluation

The discussion around the use of other forms of language proficiency evidence relates to another, wider issue of interest in this study, namely whether IELTS and other language test scores are used as the only form of evidence or as part of a holistic evaluation of language proficiency (cf. O'Loughlin, 2011). Test scores are generally used as the only evidence in the contexts of admission onto pre-sessional programs (Case Studies E and F). Changes in the visa requirements in the UK preclude any flexibility on the part of receiving institutions in these admissions contexts. In one of the departmental contexts (Case Study D) and one of the institutional admissions contexts (Case Study B), test scores or prior English-medium study are used largely as default forms of evidence: to establish whether the applicant has met the language proficiency requirement. In these contexts, borderline cases were referred to academics for consideration on a case-by-case basis.

Among the six case studies, two of the admissions contexts (Case Study A – institutional, and Case Study C – departmental, postgraduate) seem to operate according to elements from both approaches to admissions selection. On the one hand, there are set criteria to be met (language test scores or prior English-medium qualification), and decisions by admissions do not necessarily take into account all forms of proficiency evidence available. On the other hand, other forms of evidence may be considered a) before test scores become available, b) when test scores submitted constitute borderline cases, or c) when some forms of proficiency evidence (e.g. referees' evaluation, writing on the application) cast doubts on the test score evidence.



It appears from our case studies that the holistic approach to evaluating prospective students' language proficiency recommended in the *IELTS Handbook* (2007) and favoured by previous researchers (e.g. Banerjee, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2011) is more likely to be adopted in postgraduate admissions contexts. This finding is in line with Banerjee (2003) and Lloyd-Jones et al. (2012). Admissions staff may take account of the writing in the application and/or referees' evaluations alongside test scores. This is the practice in Case Study C, and among borderline cases seen by program directors in Case Study D. In other postgraduate admission contexts (especially research degrees), interviews may take place where the applicants' listening and speaking skills may be evaluated (as noted by TSU06-B and by panel member F03). These additional forms of evidence or evaluation procedures may help identify and screen out students whose language proficiency may leave them more at risk of being unable to cope with the linguistic demands of their programs. Also noteworthy here, perhaps, is the fact that the two admissions contexts (Case Studies C and D) have many more incoming applications than places available. However, a holistic approach that looks beyond test scores as the sole form of proficiency evidence may also be adopted in some institutional admissions contexts (including undergraduate level) with a view to boosting enrolment numbers. In these contexts, the admissions officers would actively look for alternative or additional evidence to complement the test scores, but treating this as 'positive' evidence: giving prospective students with borderline test scores the "benefit of the doubt" (e.g. Case Study A).

10.1.4 Factors contributing to selection approach and practices

Thus, a few main factors emerged from the case studies and the discussion above as contributing to the admissions selection approach and practices related to the use of language proficiency evidence. The perceived **trustworthiness** of different forms of proficiency evidence was discussed at length in several case studies and linked to their consequential use or non-use, or when and how they would be taken into account in the selection process. The other most salient factor identified by admissions officers was **practicality**, or more specifically, **efficiency**: coping with the demands of processing hundreds or thousands of applications within a limited time period, along with a concern over the "conversion rate" from offers of admission to actual enrolments. As such, while admissions staff generally demonstrate some critical understanding of what test scores might or might not represent, the consensus view seems to be one of "it's not perfect, but it's the most practical approach". This was the view shared by the informants (TSU04-C, TSU05-D, TSU06-B) as well as a panel member (F03).

Fairness and transparency were seen as providing good grounds for what might be felt to be inflexible selection practices and decisions on individual applicants that appear counter-intuitive (Case Study C), while transparency in the use and weighting of different forms of evidence was accorded high importance by one panel member (F07). However, the panel's reflection on how institutions or programs adjust their language proficiency requirements (e.g., which prior English-medium study qualifications to accept) to match student market characteristics (more discussion below) challenges the weight given to fairness and transparency in light of priorities around meeting recruitment targets. This, in turn, relates to the degree of **agency** admissions staff may have in adopting particular practices in respect of selection. Examples include instances where central admissions officers may have to simply process incoming applications following set criteria or requirements without the knowledge of how the requirements have come about (Case Study B); where departmental admissions selection practices have to answer to, and are constrained by, institutional decision-making entities (Case Study C); or where selection criteria and practices are dictated by strict visa requirements (Case Studies E and F).



10.2 How are minimum score requirements set or changed

10.2.1 Decision-making process

According to the informants interviewed in all the case studies, they were never directly involved in decision-making concerning the current minimum score requirements. There were two examples of part involvement in reviewing minimum score requirements. The informant in Case Study C was, at the time of the interview, instigating the process of reviewing the existing requirements; and the informant in Case Study D had sat in cross-departmental committee meetings that discussed reviewing the existing score requirements. Several informants, however, have described their understanding of the (likely) processes during the course of the interview.

From what has been reported by the informants, the process of setting or reviewing minimum score requirements mainly involves meetings at the local (departmental) level and then at the institutional level. While there are formal approval processes in place involving heads of admissions to Vice Chancellor groups (Case Studies A and B), the minimum score requirements in our case study contexts do not appear to be calibrated through any formal standard-setting exercise of the kind recommended in the *IELTS Scores Guide* or the BALEAP (2020) guidelines. The informant in Case study D, for example, talked about diverse ways of arriving at a number, without a standardised procedure. The lack of a principled basis for setting minimum score requirements echoes O'Loughlin's (2008/2011) finding in an Australian admissions context.

Furthermore, the informants' almost unanimous admission to a lack of knowledge of the process of setting score requirements across the six contexts suggests a gap in dialogue between the levels of policy-making and implementation. In other words, the precise mechanism and the basis of decisions for setting/reviewing the requirements remain rather opaque, even to admissions staff whose work involves implementing language proficiency requirements. This is contrary to the recommendation in the *BALEAP Guidelines* (2020) for the involvement of admissions officers as part of an ensemble of stakeholders who should be involved in setting minimum score requirements.

10.2.2 Basis for changing minimum score requirements

Several bases for reviewing and changing existing minimum score requirements have been discussed in the case studies. The informants from Case Studies A and C reported how feedback from academic staff working with the admitted student cohorts can feed into raising or lowering the minimum overall score requirement. In the context of pre-sessional EAP programs (Case Studies E and F), the informants reported the recently launched/developing procedure of tracking incoming students' progress post-entry. Such tracking data would form the basis of future reviews of score requirements, as well as the length of pre-sessional programs offered to students with different score levels. The procedure could involve tracking students' progress within the pre-sessional program against their IELTS scores at entry, and/or tracking students' progress on degree programs following their exit from the pre-sessional programs. This evidenced-based approach to reviewing minimum score requirements is also recommended by the BALEAP guidelines.

Apart from academic staff feedback and tracking procedures, the single most influential basis for changing minimum score requirements, either referenced explicitly or implicitly by the informants (TSU01-E, TSU02-A, TSU05-D, TSU06-B), is the institution's or department's/program's student recruitment targets and accompanying mechanisms such as market competitor analysis (Case Study A). In the panel discussion, F02 argued that this is likely the primary basis on which universities adjust the minimum language test scores for admission, and F06 recalled a context outside of the UK where adjusting minimum score requirements has been used as a means to achieve specific



compositions of student cohorts desired by the institution, and in particular to achieve a culturally more diverse student demographic. F05 remarked how adjusting minimum scores can work both for institutions looking to gain a larger market share of international students and those who aim to screen out particular groups of students. Indeed, among the case studies, informants have reported score requirements being lowered to boost student recruitment, as well as minimum scores being raised with a view to limiting the number of students entering a particular year.

Closely related to the recruitment-oriented and market-driven approach to setting minimum score requirements is the practice of using the minimum score levels of rival universities or neighbouring departments or programs as reference points, corroborating O'Loughlin's (2011) finding in an Australian admissions context. This was reported as common practice by informants TSU02-A and TSU05-D (Case studies A and D). Such benchmarking is a practice that the BALEAP guidelines warn against as it fails to take account of the linguistic demands of different programs and the needs of student cohorts in particular institutions or programs, which should otherwise serve as the principal basis for setting minimum score requirements. Within the context of test score requirements for pre-sessional EAP programs and based on her awareness of practices at other institutions, TSU01-E discussed the risks of lowering the minimum scores for entry: students admitted with low scores would struggle with their programs, academic standards would suffer, and the educational experience of other staff and students be negatively impacted. This was a point also raised in the panel discussion and in the BALEAP guidelines.

The **agency** of decision-making entities emerges again as an important theme in our discussion of the bases for, and the processes by which, changes in minimum score requirements are enacted. With conflicting priorities (e.g., meeting good standards of teaching/learning experience vs. meeting student recruitment targets), it is not surprising that there are tensions: (a) between departmental/academic staff who would incline towards raising the minimum score requirement, and the institutional decision-making bodies who would not permit it (reported by TSU03-F); and (b) across programs in the same school/faculty concerning whether all programs should have the same minimum score requirements (reported by TSU05-D). Such tensions, as previously noted, have been well-documented in the literature (e.g. Ingram & Bayliss, 2007; O'Loughlin, 2013; Hyatt, 2013; Murray, 2016).

10.2.3 Guidance from the IELTS Partners

Although support such as the *IELTS Guide for Education Institutions, Governments, Professional Bodies and Commercial Organisations* is available on the IELTS website, the informants across the different admissions contexts featured in this study seemed to be generally unaware of guidance materials provided either by the IELTS Partners or by other test providers. None of the informants across the six contexts referenced the *Guide* in their interviews, and the two EAP program coordinators (TSU01-E, TSU03-F) and the departmental admissions staff (TSU04-C) explicitly reported being unaware of its availability. Moreover, TSU05-D expressed that she was under the impression that colleagues whose work involves using IELTS scores are not using the *IELTS Guide*, and their decision-making is mostly based on the scores themselves. The informants from the institutional admissions contexts (TSU02-A, TSU06-B) both attended training seminars provided by IELTS, although they had differing perceptions about how important such knowledge is (see Case Studies A and B).

Previous studies such as O'Loughlin (2008/2011) found that the IELTS guidelines for minimum scores were downplayed or all together ignored, giving way to market competition for international students. The case studies in this research further identified a nexus of possible factors contributing to such a practice: under an overarching institutional priority for securing international student market share, there also seemed to



be a somewhat "mismatched" distribution of knowledge about IELTS and test score use among admissions decision-making entities, such that administrative staff whose remit is limited to implementing admissions requirements are the most aware of IELTS guidance (having attended training seminars, for example), while policy-making personnel responsible for setting or changing the minimum score requirements are, insofar as our informants reported, largely unaware of the guidelines on standard-setting procedures and panel membership such as those provided by the IELTS partners or BALEAP. This is further complicated by the variation across institutions in who these policymakers are and the sheer difficulty for IELTS staff to accurately identify and approach them (F05, F06, see Section 11.2 below). This looks to be an issue where coordinated efforts between academic institutions and the IELTS partners are necessary – some recommendations by the research team are made in Section 11.2 below.

11 Conclusion

In response to calls for more research on test consequences, and particularly on practices in relation to the use of language test scores in university admissions, this study explored how IELTS scores and other language proficiency evidence are used in university admissions decision-making, and how minimum score requirements are set or changed. Adopting a multiple case study approach, we explored six admissions contexts with different characteristics (i.e., decision-making levels, levels of study, and types of university), and interviewed admissions personnel ranging from central and departmental admissions officers to program directors and pre-sessional EAP coordinators. A case study was constructed for each admissions context, and a panel discussion with representatives from the IELTS Partners was held to reflect on the findings and ways forward.

Overall, we found that IELTS scores are used as the "default" form of evidence⁹ across the different admissions contexts in the UK – the necessary and often sufficient form of evidence to meet the English language proficiency admission criterion. Other forms of language proficiency evidence generally play an ancillary role, taken into account before test scores become available, in cases with borderline test scores, or to moderate the test scores in admissions decision-making. Such practices are associated with the perceived trustworthiness of different forms of evidence, fairness and transparency, and practicality; and standardised test scores are deemed to achieve a decent compromise, taking all of these factors into account.

For setting and changing minimum score requirements, it appears that existing practices mostly involve discussion and approval processes across local and institutional decision-making levels, but without formal standard-setting procedures and direct dialogue among different key stakeholder groups. Changes in minimum score requirements are more often than not market- and recruitment-driven. Moreover, while there is some evidence of awareness of guidance and knowledge of the test scores' meaning among admissions staff tasked with ensuring compliance with score requirements (but without power to change them), such knowledge may not have penetrated the policy-making level (where the requirements are set). The rectification of this issue around setting appropriate language proficiency admission requirements, which has both resource implications for academic institutions and consequences for the quality of the higher education experience, necessitates the concerted efforts of test providers, score users (receiving institutions), regulatory bodies (e.g. Office for Students), and assessment and standard-setting researchers.

9. The alternative to this is a prior English-medium study qualification recognised by receiving institutions, subject to visa requirements.



Some limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. While we did our best in sampling admissions contexts with different characteristics and interviewing admissions personnel in different roles, it is evident that our informants mainly consisted of admissions staff who work at the level of "policy implementation" – screening applications against the set requirements for language proficiency. Our challenge in identifying and reaching admissions personnel directly involved in setting or changing the requirements were shared by the IELTS Partner representatives in the panel discussion. Therefore, some of the findings reported here may not represent the full picture of how the minimum score requirements are set or changed.

Another limitation is that, within the scope and resources of our study, we did not investigate some other important dimensions of setting language requirements, such as the decision-making around what language tests to accept and what prior English-medium study qualifications to accept as meeting language proficiency criteria. These could form important foci for future research in unpacking how "readiness" for academic study is defined and benchmarked.

Finally, the departmental admissions contexts sampled in this study did not include those in the science and technology disciplines. As language use and the corresponding proficiency requirements might be different in these disciplines compared to humanities and social sciences, admission practices (re: language proficiency requirements) in these contexts are worth exploring in future research. These limitations notwithstanding, we hope that our study adds to the body of research that subjects test score use and interpretation to scrutiny, alongside all the research efforts to validate and improve how the scores are generated.

Based on the findings of this study, we make the following recommendations for test score users in university admissions and for IELTS personnel who engage with university admissions staff.

11.1 Recommendations for good practice in test score use

11.1.1 Caution in interpreting the meaning of test scores

One suggestion from admissions staff participating in this study is for the exercise of caution in score interpretation, specifically inferences about students' academic literacy based on their test scores on language proficiency tests. Informants in this study have worked with students pre- and post- entry, and they have seen test scores being over-interpreted by academic staff, as well as by students themselves, in making sense of the academic challenges in their higher education experience, and in so doing, conflating having the minimum language proficiency required to enter higher education with having fully-fledged academic literacy.

One of the key challenges with English language tests such as IELTS, which serve an important and sector-wide gatekeeping function, is that they assess English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and not English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP); that is, they do not reflect the pluralistic nature of academic literacy (Lea & Street (1998) refer to "academic literacies") by taking account of the particular language demands and expectations of the different disciplines. To do so would necessarily require more nuanced tests and a cost-benefit ratio that may be unattractive to test developers and, ultimately test-takers and test users. As such, IELTS has to be all things to all people and is necessarily a blunt tool that represents something of a compromise but which is clearly deemed to be an acceptable one for the most part (a view encapsulated by TSU05-D's¹⁰ remark and shared by other institutional (TSU06-B) and departmental (TSU04-C) admissions staff); it is unlikely that the status quo will be upset in the foreseeable future.

10. See Section 7.2, p.37. Use of test scores and other proficiency evidence.



While it performs its function adequately and is regarded as fit-for-purpose by its users, universities need to recognise the need for students to have opportunities to develop conversancy in the particular literacy requirements of their respective disciplines, and there is a growing literature concerning how that can be done (Hyland, 2007; Baik & Greig, 2009; Murray & Nallaya, 2016).

Echoing the insights of our EAP (TSU01-E) and admissions officer (TSU06-B¹¹) informants, therefore, what is key is that universities and receiving departments, as well as students themselves, need to be sufficiently aware of what IELTS does and does not/ cannot assess. They need to recognise that an IELTS score only certifies the test-taker having the (minimum) English proficiency for academic study. It does not account for the multitude of discipline-specific academic literacy practices, and it only indicates the starting point for learning and socialising into these practices, not unlike the point where a learner driver passes their driving test. In turn, it is imperative for universities to recognise and act on the need for providing post-enrolment language and academic literacy support – some researchers (e.g. Thorpe et al., 2017) even advocate such provision throughout the duration of study. Equally, students need to take up such in-session support where it is offered.

11. See comment by TSU06-B about the need for post-entry in-session support – Section 5.6, p.25.

There is also an argument for admissions teams/tutors familiarising themselves with what IELTS scores and profiles (see below) translate to in actual performance terms. While they may be familiar with performance descriptors, being able to associate enrolled students with particular overall scores can be a helpful indicator that enables them to fine-tune their understanding of what a 6.0 vs a 7.0 student sounds like or writes like. This needs to be a conscious process; that is, as they get to have contact with newly commenced students, they can remind themselves of their IELTS scores upon entry. This could comprise part of a larger training program targeted at all key personnel involved in the admissions process which, once in place, could form a criterion for the issuing of a kitemark for institutions (see Section 11.2.3).

11.1.2 Using test scores and other forms of proficiency evidence

More research is still needed in this regard. The literature (e.g. Banerjee, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2013), test providers (e.g. IELTS partners, ETS), and professional guidelines such as BALEAP (2020), have all recommended to varying degrees the use of other forms of language proficiency evidence in conjunction with test scores. In this study, we found evidence of good practice in using other sources of evidence to supplement IELTS scores in borderline cases, but did not identify any systematic mechanisms for when and how this is applied. Within the case studies, while there were critical reflections on the reliance on test scores as a single piece of proficiency evidence, justifications have been given in relation to practicality (e.g. cohort size and level of study); concerns over the authenticity and security of other forms of evidence; and the diverse nature of other forms of evidence (e.g. English-medium qualifications) which presents difficulties to making comparisons across applications. If we are to recognise the value (or virtue) of using multiple forms of evidence and resolve to put it into practice, there is an urgent need to investigate systematic ways in which alternative sources of language proficiency evidence can and should be used in combination with test scores.

11.1.3 A role for post-entry diagnostic assessment

Whether because universities misuse IELTS – and indeed other gatekeeping tests – and set their entry requirements unrealistically low due to recruitment and other pressures, it is widely recognised within the sector that a (sometimes significant) proportion of students who successfully meet those requirements struggle subsequently with English. This fact emphasises the need for universities to understand that *minimum* requirements are precisely that, and that IELTS recognises that some students will need to develop their language skills during the course of their studies.



There is certainly an argument for saying that, in addition to, or through, academic literacy tuition, they also need to continue to improve their general language proficiency. How universities determine who requires language support is a question that has been the subject of much discussion in the Australian HE context. Here, over the past decade and in response to government pressure in the form of a government regulatory document titled *Good practice principles for English language competence for international students in Australian universities* (2007), many universities have looked at and/or instituted some form of secondary, post-enrolment language assessment (PELA). While there are costs and logistical challenges associated with it (see, for example, Read, 2016), it has the advantage of serving as a kind of "moderation" mechanism for those students who have entered with IELTS or other stated "equivalent" tests scores.

11.1.4 Setting English language proficiency requirements

Universities need to reflect critically on how they go about setting minimum English language scores. Typically, universities have committees or working groups specifically tasked with doing this and the makeup of such bodies is clearly important. While admissions and visa compliance officers are often involved, there need to be individuals included who have a good knowledge of the IELTS and of language assessment more generally. These bodies often tend to set minimum institutional entry requirements specified in terms of bands, with departments being grouped into one or other of these bands. For example, a subject falling within Band A may require an overall IELTS score of 6.5, with no component scores below 6.0, while a subject falling within Band B may require an overall score of 7.0 with no more than two component scores at 6.0/6.5 and remainder at 7.0+, etc. Which band a given department should fall within needs, ideally, to be the result of longitudinal tracking of students within the department – recognising the effects of intervening factors that can affect academic performance. Over time, the effect of such factors will lessen and a more accurate determination of suitable IELTS scores may be enabled as a result. Bands are desirable in that they recognise that certain groups of disciplines are more literacy-heavy than others, and to use universal standards for all receiving departments would make no such affordance. Ideally, however, further refinement in the form of IELTS sub-score profiles set within the broader bands (where these exist) would help ensure that the language demands of individual disciplines and their associated departments are met by incoming students.

Such profiling is a growing practice, although there is a question as to whether departments have the resident expertise to do this with a meaningful degree of accuracy and/or whether they are able to call upon the services of English language teachers or applied linguists familiar enough with the language demands of their subjects to help with this. However scores are set, they need to be periodically reviewed to see whether they are fit for purpose.

One of the potential challenges that arises around score-setting is a tension between what is deemed to be academically appropriate – that is, the weight given to such tracking data and the voice of the IELTS/language assessment 'experts' in determining, as realistically as possible, the level of proficiency students require in order to meet the demands of their particular degree programs – versus the weight given to other imperatives, most notably recruitment targets and the significant income generation associated with international students. This can be regarded as an ethical issue for there is a need to balance what is deemed to be in the students' best interests with the institutional need to remain competitive – and reflected in the common practice of benchmarking against similar-ranking universities. It is a difficult balance to strike as one might reasonably argue that benchmarking should not enter into the equation; universities should set English language entry scores appropriately according to the language demands of the subject irrespective of other considerations.



One solution would be for universities collectively to determine and consistently apply minimum entry scores for all subjects; however, this brings its own challenges: while lower-ranking universities who may be under greater financial pressure are likely to opt for lower minimum scores to ensure that they meet their enrolment targets, higher-ranking universities, who will wish to attract only the best students, maintain their reputations and thus be highly selective, are likely to opt for higher minimum scores. Furthermore, curricula, and the language demands they place on students, are likely to differ between institutions.

One issue emerging from the case studies concerns the length of time that alternative forms of evidence to an IELTS score should be considered to remain valid. For example, if an applicant has completed an undergraduate degree through the medium of English eight years before, how much language attrition may have occurred? University English language compliance groups may wish to consider this question. They may also need to consider what other circumstances might mitigate the possibility of attrition and how these circumstances can best be identified and weighed. It may be, for example, that rather than simply accepting the completion of GCSEs as evidence of a sufficient level of proficiency, they require applicants who completed their GCSEs more than a certain number of years ago to provide in addition an IELTS score achieved within the two years prior to their application.

11.2 Suggestions for IELTS Partners' further engagement with test score users

11.2.1 Tailoring guidance materials to score users

One of the important themes emerging from the case studies has been the question *Who needs to know what and how much?* in terms of admissions staff's knowledge about the IELTS test tasks, test delivery, and the meaning of the test scores. Some admissions staff interviewed in this study stressed the importance of knowing the meaning of the scores beyond "numbers on a page" (TSU01-E, TSU02-A), while others considered scores themselves to be sufficient given the administrators' limited role in screening applications (TSU06-B). The latter view echoes that of some administrative staff in O'Loughlin (2011), over which the author lamented that the selection system in place at the time "does not demand such understanding...to make an informed, holistic judgement about the language proficiency of an international applicant" (p.156). Knowing what test scores mean, however, was seen as important for those responsible for setting score requirements (i.e. those at policy-making level) – a view echoed by the panel members.

For published guidance materials targeted at score users, one suggestion from admissions staff informants in this study has been to specify the score-based inferences about language use in academic study – e.g. what kinds of reading and writing in academic contexts students with a particular band score are expected to be capable of negotiating. According to TSU02-A, such user-oriented scales would be more useful for receiving academic institutions than presenting only score (marking) descriptors in guidance materials – an idea that resonates with an argument proffered by Field (2018) in relation to the IELTS Listening test. Such information, along with other information about the assessment tasks and delivery, will need to be communicated in language and a level of detail suitable to score users who are non-specialists in language assessment.

Apart from guidance materials targeted at admissions officers and those setting the minimum score requirements, there is also potential value in developing guidance materials for EAP staff responsible for providing post-entry language support.



The EAP staff informant TSU01-E expressed how she would also appreciate more information about the meaning of the scores and the procedures which generate them (e.g. marking procedures); information that would help them understand the performance of incoming pre-sessional students better – e.g. the discrepancies in performance between individuals with the same score.

11.2.2 Provision of training for admissions staff

Both central admissions staff informants (TSU02-A, TSU06-B) valued the opportunity to attend the training seminar provided by IELTS. They appreciated the opportunity to learn about the meaning of different score bands and review their own previous perceptions; the opportunity to network and share experience with other admissions staff; and the reassurance of procedural transparency and test security. They both recommended this training for new admissions staff, and TSU02-A raised a practical point that the training needs to run either regularly or be on-demand to take account of admissions staff turnaround, which could happen at various points during the academic year. Building on TSU02-A's point about on-demand training, we also suggest making available an online training package or short course to complement face-to-face training provision and which can be accessed at any time. The performance sample rating activity, which TSU02-A found useful in understanding the meaning of score bands, could be incorporated into the online training package as an interactive element.

A significant 'hurdle' in effective training provision is identifying target groups (or indeed, individuals) of score users in academic institutions. The IELTS Partner representatives reflected on their experience in the panel discussion. F06 expressed that "trying to get exactly the right people in the different institutions into the training" is like "finding a needle in a haystack". Based on their experience, both F06 and F05 remarked that the people who make decisions on score requirements vary from institution to institution. F05 shared the experience that, while it is relatively easy to identify and reach out to (administrative) admissions officers and EAP staff, there has been comparatively little successful contact with academic staff – the stakeholder group dealing with incoming students' day-to-day language issues in academic studies and "who probably ought to be feeding more into defining what the requirements are" (F05). In response to this, F07 made a useful suggestion for modifying the way training seminars is organised, such that each event would involve stakeholders at different decision-making levels within each participating institution:

"You know what would be really good, is if in one seminar you had two or three, four institutions represented, but from those institutions, you had a combination of administrative staff, plus academic staff, so they could sit together and see this– have the same information, and go back and have those discussions. Because the one thing that struck me throughout this afternoon is there seems to be a lack of discourse internally within institutions, between the people, and that, to me, is the missing link."

This suggestion for training provision resonates with TSU01-E's view about the importance of internal communication between teams (e.g. EAP staff and admissions officers) within an institution, offering an opportunity for different stakeholders to share their perspectives (as well as experiences and priorities) about language proficiency requirements and what minimum levels might be appropriate. This has a parallel to the kind of standard-setting panel composition recommended in the BALEAP (2020) guidelines.

11.2.3 Promoting appropriate score use and standard-setting through formal recognition

The research team suggest providing formal recognition of standard-setting exercises for minimum score requirements as a way of more pro-active engagement with test score users, adding to existing efforts of providing guidance materials and training seminars. In the panel discussion, following from the previous discussion about identifying the right admissions personnel to target outreach and training, F02 argued that the challenge might not (just) be about identifying the right people, but a general lack of motivation on the institution's part for more stringent standard setting. Indeed, one of the IELTS Partner representatives (F05) observed that formal standard-setting exercises have been taken up more by professional organisations than academic institutions. However, a strong case could be made to institutions based on the resource implications of enrolling students whose language proficiency presents challenges to coping with the academic programs, resulting in non-completions, poor student satisfaction, and potential reputational damage. The panel members were of the view that more evidence about the cost to universities of admitting students who are not suitably prepared could be communicated to institutions, and regulatory bodies such as the Office for Students could play a useful role here. Building on the idea of formal recognition, the panel proposed that the IELTS Partners could offer a kitemark to institutions that have followed: a) the specific standard-setting procedures; and b) guidance on panel membership set out by the IELTS Partners.

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Appendix A: Sample of interview schedule

Start by...

- Can you tell us about your role in the university?
- (and your role in admissions selection?) [Optional follow-up]

1) How language test scores are used in your admissions context

How...

- Can you describe generally how language test scores are used in admitting students to the program?
- Are the language test scores used as a **screening criterion** ('yes or no') or **together** with other criteria (part of a holistic evaluation)?
 - At **what stage(s)** of the admissions decision-making process are the scores used? (e.g. initial screening vs. just before offer; looking at subject qualifications first or language scores first)
 - Any 'leeway' with students who just miss the 'mark'?
- Are the **sub-scores** (score bands for the four skills) used in the decision-making process together with the overall test score?
- Is any other evidence of language proficiency taken into account in admissions?
 - in place of test scores? combined with test scores?

Why...

- Why do you think this particular **selection method** (in terms of using language proficiency evidence) is used? What **factors** do you think are relevant?
 - e.g. cohort size, competitors, fairness in different senses, trustworthiness of evidence
- Does the university have an **internationalisation** agenda? To the best of your knowledge, what do you think it involves?
- Does the agenda of internationalisation play a **role** in the ways **language proficiency evidence is used** (in admissions selection in your context)?

Any change?

- Has the selection method **changed** over the years?
- Has the selection method gone through reviews? (If so, when/how often?)

Your views

- What do you think would be 'good practices' in test score use in admissions selection?
- And what about bad practices you are aware of at other institutions?

2) How are minimum language test scores set as part of admission requirements in your context

How...

- To the best of your knowledge, **who** determines the minimum scores?
 - Do you know who sets them?
- To the best of your knowledge, **how** was the current minimum language score requirement set? (the process)



Why...

- What formed the **basis** of setting a certain minimum score?
[Note: may already be answered in the above question]
 - o e.g. standard-setting exercise, expert advice, competing universities' requirements)
 - o Follow-up: Are you aware of any advice provided by the IELTS Partners on setting entry requirements?
 - o Have you or your colleagues used the guidance document provided by IELTS Partners?
- Has **internationalisation** played a role in the ways the minimum language score requirement was set?

Any change?

- Have the minimum score requirements **changed** over the years?
 - o If so, when did they change?
 - o How were they monitored and reviewed?

Your views

- What do you think would be 'good practices' in setting language requirements in admissions selection?

Appendix B: Informed consent form

Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA)

How are IELTS scores set and used for university admissions selection: A cross-institutional case study

Participant Information Sheet

Researchers: Dr Daniel Lam, Prof Anthony Green, Dr Neil Murray, Dr Angela Gayton

You are warmly invited to take part in this study. Before you decide whether to take part, please read this information sheet carefully, and ask us any questions about this study if anything is unclear.

What is the purpose of this study?

This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how IELTS scores are set and used for university admissions selection across different institutions and decision-making levels.

Why have I been invited?

You are invited to take part because you are involved in the admissions selection process within your institution/department.

What will I be doing if I take part in the study?

If you decide to take part, you will participate in a semi-structured interview, with potential follow-up communication via email.

In the interview, you will start by giving a description of the admissions selection procedures and the use of IELTS scores in your institution/department, then the researcher will ask follow-up questions. We will ask for your views on the admissions selection method(s) used and the minimum score requirement set for the year. Cohort statistics for international student intake and the incoming students' IELTS scores will be reviewed and discussed in the interview if you are able to supply the information. The interviews will be audio recorded.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

By taking part, you can help the researchers and IELTS Partners understand the varied practices in using and setting IELTS scores for university admissions selection. The findings can inform developing models of good practice, and facilitate IELTS personnel's advice-giving and training to academic institutions.

The interviews also provide an opportunity for you to reflect on your institution/department's practices in setting and/or using IELTS scores in admissions selection.

What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

You may feel that some information is sensitive and not suitable to be revealed in the interview. Please be reassured that all information you give us will be kept strictly confidential, and you have the rights to require that certain information be deleted from the data. We will also take all necessary measures to ensure that neither you nor your institution will be identified in any reports of this research.

What happens if I do not want to continue taking part in the study?

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary, and you have the rights to withdraw from this study at any time. If you decide to withdraw, you can opt for us to delete all the data collected from you.



Will the data collected from me in this study kept confidential?

All information and data collected from you will be kept strictly confidential. The audio-recordings of your interviews will be kept in a password-protected external hard-drive stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office. In the transcripts of the recordings, you will be assigned a participant identifier (e.g. C08) and remain anonymous. Reports of the study findings will not contain your name or any other information that can identify you. All data will be destroyed on completion of this study.

What will happen to the results of this study?

The results of this study will be used for academic purposes only. We will produce a research report to be submitted to the IELTS Partners, and share the findings in journal publications and at conference presentations.

Who can I contact if I have any questions about this study?

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you can contact:

Dr Daniel Lam
Daniel.Lam@beds.ac.uk



Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA)

**How are IELTS scores set and used for university admissions selection:
A cross-institutional case study**

Informed Consent Form

Confirmation of consent to take part in this study

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the above information sheet.
I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and received satisfactory answers to them.
2. I voluntarily give my consent to participate in the study.
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.
3. I agree that the interviews I take part in will be audio-recorded.

Consent for use of the data

I agree that the researchers can use the following forms of data – anonymously and with necessary redactions – for research and teaching purposes (e.g. in publications, at conference presentations, in a university class):

1. The transcripts of the interviews
2. Additional specified conditions (where applicable):

Signature

.....
Date

Name

Signature

Appendix C: Coding scheme for initial coding by interview question

- 0) Role in admissions selection
 - 1a) How language test scores are used – general
 - 1b) Screening process
 - 1c) Special cases ['leeway', 'students who just miss the mark']
 - 1d) Other language proficiency evidence
 - 1e) Factors contributing to current practices
 - 1f) Role of internationalisation in use of test scores
 - 1g) Changes and reviews in use of test scores
 - 1h) Views about good practices

- 2a) Who set the minimum scores
- 2b) Process of setting minimum scores
- 2c) Basis of setting minimum scores
- 2d) Awareness of IELTS guidance
- 2e) Link between scores and length of pre-sessional
- 2f) Assessment of pre-sessional
- 2g) Role of internationalisation in setting of test scores
- 2h) Changes, review and monitoring
- 2i) Good practices in setting minimum scores