

How admissions professionals can ensure applicants are **university ready**

Introduction

Institutions stand at a crossroads within the changing landscape of international education. While striving to attract a diverse array of talented international students, admissions professionals face numerous considerations to ensure that admitted students not just survive, but thrive on campus, and are poised to contribute to academic and social communities. Communicative skills are a vital factor in student success. For those students who aspire to travel abroad and study far away from home, language proficiency directly impacts successful integration on campus.

Investing in the Future of Success

Academic leaders understand that a rich campus environment offering diverse worldviews and perspectives creates opportunities for innovation that can have real-world impact. International education has long been a launchpad for students aspiring to make change for their families and for themselves.

Students aiming to study internationally are keenly aware that enrolling in English language and IELTS courses is more than just skill-building; it is preparing them to thrive in a culturally rich, English-speaking academic world.

To attract diverse, dynamic, and

At IELTS, accurate and reliable evaluation of English-language proficiency is not fun and games – it is a critical marker of success.

engaged global talent, many institutions have made substantial investments, expanding their global reach through development of cross-national research programs, faculty recruitment and development, international partnerships, and more¹.

As an admissions leader, your standards for language proficiency assessments can be the crucial factor that minimizes risk and maximizes success for international students.

At IELTS, accurate and reliable evaluation of English-language proficiency is not fun and games– it is a critical marker of success.

[1] Bedenlier, Kondakci, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018

By leveraging IELTS' proven methodology, you can trust that your institution and your international applicants are capable of excellence.

Built on a foundation of validated evidence, IELTS examines both the social and intellectual aspects of language use. This depth of evaluation makes IELTS the ideal resource to inform admission of

international applicants.²

In an already pressurized recruitment and retention environment, there is no room for error or misunderstanding of student proficiency. This is because every interaction and every assignment, in the classroom and on campus, depends on students' command of language.

Language Proficiency: The Foundation of Academic Success

For international students, academic success means being able to fully engage with all aspects of campus life, from conversation to building new knowledge, skills, and abilities. The language skills students bring with them have a direct and immediate impact and can have significant consequences for their social and cultural integration. Students in an academic setting are continually absorbing, processing, and articulating complex ideas. Whether

they are deciphering the nuanced arguments in dense texts, contributing to vibrant class discussions, listening to lectures from a range of speakers with varied accents, or expressing their own synthesized understanding in essays and presentations — their language skills are constantly at play.³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this complex language interaction is challenging to assess.

Institutions use English proficiency

[2] Cushing & Ren, 2022

[3] Tai & Zhao, 2022

tests to gain critical insights into the potential success of international students. While many test scores may offer a snapshot of aspects of proficiency it is vital that the assessment provides insight into how well a student

is able to use English, AND

is able to learn in an English medium academic context.

This speaks to both the social

nature of English for communication, as well as the cognitive nature of English as a resource to attain knowledge.

[T]he test does not just ask, "Can this person speak English?" but also, "Can this person use English to think critically, to understand complex ideas, and to interact appropriately in an academic setting?"

IELTS Framework for Assessing English Language Proficiency

When assessing language proficiency, it is important that the assessment provides information about current proficiency as well as insight into the potential for real-world performance. An evidence-based approach to this type of assessment uses the Socio-Cognitive Framework⁴ which provides a well-defined structure for test developers and test score users. The Socio-Cognitive Framework, backed by a substantial body of research⁵ evidence, ensures that the test does not just ask, "Can this person speak English?" but also, "Can this person use English to

think critically, to understand complex ideas, and to interact appropriately in an academic setting?"

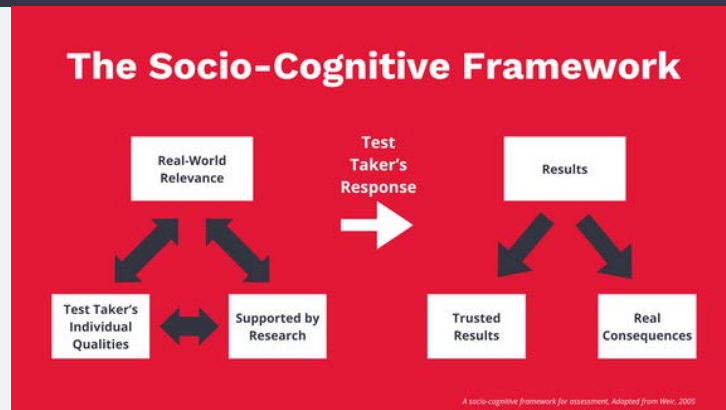
In order to effectively address each element of the socio-cognitive framework and to ensure all aspects of a language skill are elicited, it is vital to move beyond simple multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank questions to incorporate more diverse tasks that activate the skills and abilities expected of students by higher education institutions.

[4] Weir, 2025

[5] <https://ielts.org/researchers/our-research/research-reports>

IELTS is the only English language proficiency assessment offered at scale globally that is developed in alignment with the Socio-Cognitive Framework.

To fully understand how IELTS is designed to provide detailed insights into your students' English proficiency and abilities to learn in English, what follows is a detailed exploration of how IELTS is designed to probe each skill.



Setting the Standard of Communicative Proficiency

IELTS assesses more than just the ability to speak English; it provides a measure of a student's readiness for real-world academic speaking scenarios. It provides valuable insights into student performance that can lead to success in higher education settings. When seeking students who are as capable in academic dialogues as they are in social interactions, the IELTS Speaking test stands alone among the most used English proficiency tests as a comprehensive measure of these skills.

IELTS Speaking

Find out more about IELTS speaking tasks at: ielts.org/acspeaking

Of all the language skills, speaking is more often equated with performance in the other language skills of writing, listening, or reading, making it one of the most important and challenging skills to assess.

Speaking skills risk being easily misjudged by decision-makers with limited language assessment expertise who may equate clarity and confidence

with proficiency. Moreover, polished speech can mislead listeners about language proficiency.

IELTS is a valuable partner in the admission process, providing a detailed and nuanced assessment of the full capabilities of test takers.

Speaking as a skill engages specific cognitive processes appropriate to the context, whether that be social or academic.⁶ In speaking one must be able to both

speak to demonstrate
understanding AND

speak to acquire knowledge.

Speaking Skill Tasks:

The IELTS Speaking tasks are expertly designed to evaluate the full range of a student's cognitive speech processes in 11- 13 minutes. In each case, these tasks are administered by IELTS Examiners who hold credentials in language or linguistics education. These professionals undergo rigorous training, certification, and regular evaluations to uphold the highest standards in language assessment. The person-to-person interactive speaking interview captures everything from the initial generation of an idea to its articulation and real-time self-correction.

[6] Cushing & Ren, 2022

How the Cognitive Processes of Speaking are Engagement in Assessment: IELTS® vs AI

While IELTS speaking assessment engages all cognitive process of speech, most AI-generated and scored assessments are trained to recognize structure, vocabulary range and grammar.



Cognitive Processes Involved in Speaking, from Field (2008)

Evaluating Speaking:

While technology offers opportunities for inexpensive, wide-scale assessment, measuring speaking depth and differentiating rehearsed speech from spontaneous speech is currently beyond algorithmic capabilities.⁷

The exceptional expertise of IELTS Examiners...ensures that the IELTS test accurately identifies each student's true communicative abilities beyond surface-level performance.

Unlike algorithmic scoring, which requires students to generate predictable patterns of speech in response to fixed tasks, the interactive nature of the IELTS Speaking interview allows the IELTS Examiner to:

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- probe for information
- test knowledge of specific topics
- gauge ability to infer
- assess ability to manage the conversation when it goes beyond the student's depth of knowledge or expertise.

This gives the student the best opportunity to be assessed on their communicative proficiency.

[7] Kyriakopoulos, 2021

[8] Zechner & Evanini, 2019; Chen, et al., 2018

IELTS Speaking topics are carefully controlled making it difficult to rehearse speech.

And--unlike algorithmic scoring — the IELTS Speaking test cannot be 'hacked' using gaming techniques that can trick mechanical evaluators into mistakenly evaluating speech as high quality when it is not. Given the dynamic nature of speaking and its importance for academic success, the exceptional expertise of IELTS Examiners, with the rigorous design of the Speaking assessment, ensures that the IELTS test accurately identifies each student's true communicative abilities beyond surface-level performance.

IELTS Writing

The IELTS Writing test is an indispensable asset for institutions evaluating student preparedness for the demands of academic writing. IELTS looks beyond grammar and vocabulary competencies, engaging all aspects of the writing process, both cognitive and contextual, to provide a more informed assessment that digs into the very heart of what makes academic writing a challenging yet vital skill.

Find specific examples of IELTS Listening, Reading and Writing tasks at: ielts.org/acsamples.

Writing in an academic context requires the ability to

write to learn, AND

write to demonstrate learning.

Writing to learn, such as taking notes in a lecture or while reading a passage, is a critical academic skill and a strong predictor of success for students studying in English medium environments⁹. Writing to demonstrate learning is a separate but critical skill for success in academic settings. The visibility of this writing extends to faculty across all specialties, not just those well-versed in English language teaching and learning. It serves to measure student learning and to highlight their creative and innovative contributions. However, writing that misses the mark can have unintended but significant impacts, not only affecting the academic evaluations of international students but also creating challenges for the faculty who seek to support them.

Academic writing — like reading — is a skill that can challenge even first-language speakers; expert evaluation is essential to accurately discern ability as this can have significant impacts on academic outcomes. IELTS is a valuable partner in the admission process by thoroughly reviewing and screening all aspects of the writing skill.

[9] Rose et al., 2019

[10] Cushing & Ren, 2022

Writing Skill Tasks:

IELTS engages writing skills using two extended Writing tasks. This dual approach is meant to activate many cognitive processes of writing, while providing insight into writing capabilities from generating notes to generating a full essay and demonstrating ability to revise for clarity and cohesion¹⁰.

- Task 1 uniquely assesses the ability to describe and analyze data from charts, graphs, and tables.
- Task 2 evaluates argumentative and expository writing skills.

Together, these tasks create an evaluation that immerses test takers in the experience of typical writing expected during their academic career, and well beyond.

When evaluating language proficiency in academic writing, depth matters.

How Writing is Evaluated:

As with IELTS Speaking, a trained IELTS Examiner reviews and evaluates every piece of writing generated by test takers. Different Examiners mark each writing task, ensuring that at least three different Examiners evaluate a test taker. This provides full-view, human-led insight into the capability of each person assessed.

Given the nature of writing and its importance to learning new knowledge and communicating ideas, there are few shortcuts that can provide the same level of evaluation as an expert trained in writing assessment.

When evaluating language proficiency in academic writing, depth matters. Where technological advancements provide tantalizing shortcuts to evaluating writing, especially at scale,¹¹ IELTS continues to deliver a Writing assessment that requires a comprehensive demonstration of skill and a significant amount of generated text that cannot readily be evaluated algorithmically. Given the nature of writing and its importance to learning new knowledge and communicating ideas, there are few shortcuts that can provide the same level of evaluation as an expert trained in writing assessment.¹²

The importance of writing for academic success cannot be underestimated, and as part of a duty of care to students, it is imperative that the depth and breadth of writing skills be fully evaluated.

Institutions can trust that IELTS Writing test scores not only indicate students' capability in English but also their preparedness to engage in written academic discourse at the university level.

[11] Zhang, 2013

[12] Anson & Perelman, 2017

Writing Tasks: IELTS® vs AI

AI scoring assesses short tasks emphasising vocabulary and grammar. IELTS evaluates more complex writing through tasks requiring data interpretation and essay development.

IELTS® vs Algorithmic Scoring	
Number of Tasks	
Two	Five
Task Description	
Task 1: Describe and explain visual data presented in a table, graphic, or chart	Task 1-3: Describe a picture of a common everyday scene
Task 2: Write an essay in response to a point of view, argument, or problem	Task 4-5: Answer a question in a complete sentence or sentences
Purpose	
Task 1: Transfer information from multiple sources to describe, summarize or explain	Tasks 1-5: Demonstrate vocabulary knowledge
Task 2: Write a persuasive essay to defend or attack an argument or position	Tasks 1-5: Use correct grammar in a sentence
Timing	
60 minutes total	20 minutes total
Length of Response from Test Taker	
Task 1: 150 words min Task 2: 250 words min	Task 1-3: 1 sentence min Task 4-5: 50 words min

Takeaways

- IELTS assess comprehensive writing skills, including grammar and vocabulary.
- IELTS allows for nuanced evaluation of writing, including word choices and quality of construction.
- IELTS requires the development of essays to inform, persuade, or argue, and includes a description of visual data presented in charts, graphs, and tables.

IELTS Listening

The IELTS Listening test offers institutions more than just a snapshot of students' comprehension; it provides a comprehensive evaluation of essential academic listening skills. From decoding the sounds of speech to fully grasping the speaker's intent and context, IELTS reflects the complexities of listening in academic settings. For institutions aiming to enroll students proficient in both lecture-based and conversational listening, IELTS serves as a tested and valuable metric.

Listening is a skill that activates numerous complex processes and abilities. Additionally, listening engages multiple cognitive processes to unpack meaning and intention communicated in lectures, conversations, recordings, and various media. As such, through the socio-cognitive lens, listening engages both

listening to learn AND

listening to interact.

To assess listening skills, IELTS Listening tasks simulate the listening experiences that occur during a day in the life of a university student. Each IELTS Listening task engages multiple listening processes, with an

emphasis on the meaning construction and discourse construction, different from lower order listening skills focused on recognizing sounds and connecting them with words and sentences. Whereas algorithmic-based tests are typically limited to a student's lower order listening processes,¹³ IELTS evaluates listening skills holistically, as recommended by the Socio-Cognitive Framework, providing a true assessment of the ability to learn from listening and listen interactively in academic environments.¹⁴

Listening Skill Tasks:

The IELTS Listening test's varied question types and audio passage structures simulate scenarios that students commonly face in academic settings. This includes complex listening tasks including:

- diagram labeling
- completing lecture notes
- short answer questions
- sentence completion.

IELTS actively avoids a traditional multiple-choice format when assessing listening. These diverse tasks more closely mirror the skills learners will need to demonstrate in academic contexts. For example, diagram labeling items foreshadow experiences in science labs, gap-fill exercises mirror note taking during

[13] Taylor & Chan, 2015

[14] Cushing & Ren, 2022

lectures, and multi-choice queries echo seminar discussions where students discern key points¹⁵. By replicating these environments, IELTS ensures the Listening test provides practical and applicable insight into how a student will engage with listening in academic experiences.

How Listening is Evaluated:

IELTS Listening is a 40-minute evaluation built around the various contexts of listening that a test taker will experience when studying in an English medium environment. The test is broken into four sections that increase in complexity as the test taker progresses. The design of IELTS Listening tasks evaluates the ability to understand English across a variety of contexts and types of input. This includes evaluating whether the test taker can:

- identify central themes or messages from audio recordings
- identify specific information including names, numbers, dates, times, and factual details
- identify the feelings, viewpoints, or intentions of a speaker or multiple speakers in a conversation
- understand how ideas are logically connected or how they evolve in conversations and lectures
- distinguish between conflicting information that is presented and clarified through discussions.

[15] Ibid



Each Listening task is carefully aligned to specific aspects of listening relevant for real-world communication. Final responses are scored through auto-marking to ensure a consistent, objective, and fair evaluation of the performance where answers are either correct, demonstrating ability, or incorrect, indicating a lack of understanding or misinterpretation.

Much like writing, proficient listening is a vital skill that influences success in English medium academic settings and has a ripple effect that reaches faculty across disciplines. Poor listening comprehension can hinder students' ability to absorb information and participate effectively in academic discussions, creating challenges not only for international students but also for the faculty invested in supporting academic success. Students' listening abilities, therefore, have broader implications, affecting their academic evaluations and the overall quality of interaction within the classroom.

Given these broader implications, it is crucial that a proficiency assessment engages all aspects of listening to ensure students are not only hearing but truly comprehending and engaging with their academic environments.

IELTS Reading

For institutions assessing potential students, the integration of rich contextual representation and demanding cognitive tasks in the IELTS Reading test ensures that students are assessed beyond the word level, providing valuable insight into students' ability to manage the various complex tasks and learning experiences that are developed through academic reading.

Reading is one of the most important skills for success in university study. As with other language skills, reading serves multiple purposes in academic settings, both cognitive and contextual, which can be described as:

reading to learn AND

reading to analyze, evaluate, and critique.

It is through reading that students will engage with most of the foundational knowledge in their selected disciplines, learn to critically review and analyze information relevant to their fields. Further, it is through reading that students engage with diverse perspectives, one of the intrinsic

Much like writing, proficient listening is a vital skill that influences success in English medium academic settings and has a ripple effect that reaches faculty across disciplines.

values of international education, and highly prized by international students¹⁶

As with other skills, reading engages a variety of internal processes. At the lower proficiency levels, reading requires that students be able to identify words. At the higher levels, it requires them to be able to gain new understanding from content and process information provided in a text to use during their course of study.¹⁷ From the cognitive aspect, reading requires active participation, from being able to skim and scan for details, to the ability to read deeply, grasp central ideas and understand the communicative intent of passages.

Reading Skill Tasks:

The IELTS Reading test includes three sections that, like Listening, are designed around the challenges of reading in the context of studying in English medium environments. Reading tasks include:

- choose the correct answers
- short answer questions
- sentence completion
- labeling diagrams
- extrapolating details from charts and graphs
- matching information and details to specific statements or categories.

In reading, IELTS pushes beyond

the conventional boundaries of reading proficiency exams to provide a pragmatically grounded assessment of reading. Each Reading task is carefully aligned to the requirements of academic reading in academic study. For example, when completing sentences, the test taker demonstrates their ability to extract key details and synthesize information from academic papers. Matching information questions mirror academic research, where a student reviews several sources to identify relevant associated content in their discipline of study. These tasks bring the socio-cognitive aspects of reading to life to ensure that the final evaluation of proficiency provides details beyond just skimming and scanning for a correct answer.

How Reading is Evaluated:

The reading abilities of test takers are evaluated in a 60-minute timed assessment, where the test taker reviews three distinct reading passages of academic nature on various topics from science, technology, history, the arts, and other relevant academic subjects. Each passage is informed by common genres found in academic textbooks and research papers. Each section introduces new challenges to thoroughly assess multiple levels of reading

[16] Keystone 2023; AIRC & Bonard, 2023; Baer & Martel, 2023

[17] Cushing & Ren, 2022

proficiency. This includes uncovering how well a reader can:

- identify central themes of passages
- extract specific details from reading passages, and accompanying charts, graphs, and visuals
- recognize an author's tone, attitude, and implied meaning
- follow the logical flow of arguments, narratives, and opinions
- recognize aspects of debate including presenting and rebutting arguments, and comparing and contrasting information to lead to specific conclusions.

As with Listening, Reading tasks are aligned to real-world reading expectations in academic environments. Using established approaches to auto-marking, final responses are evaluated through a fast, objective, and fair review to score answers as correct, demonstrating proficiency in reading, and incorrect, where information is misunderstood or there is room for improvement in overall comprehension.

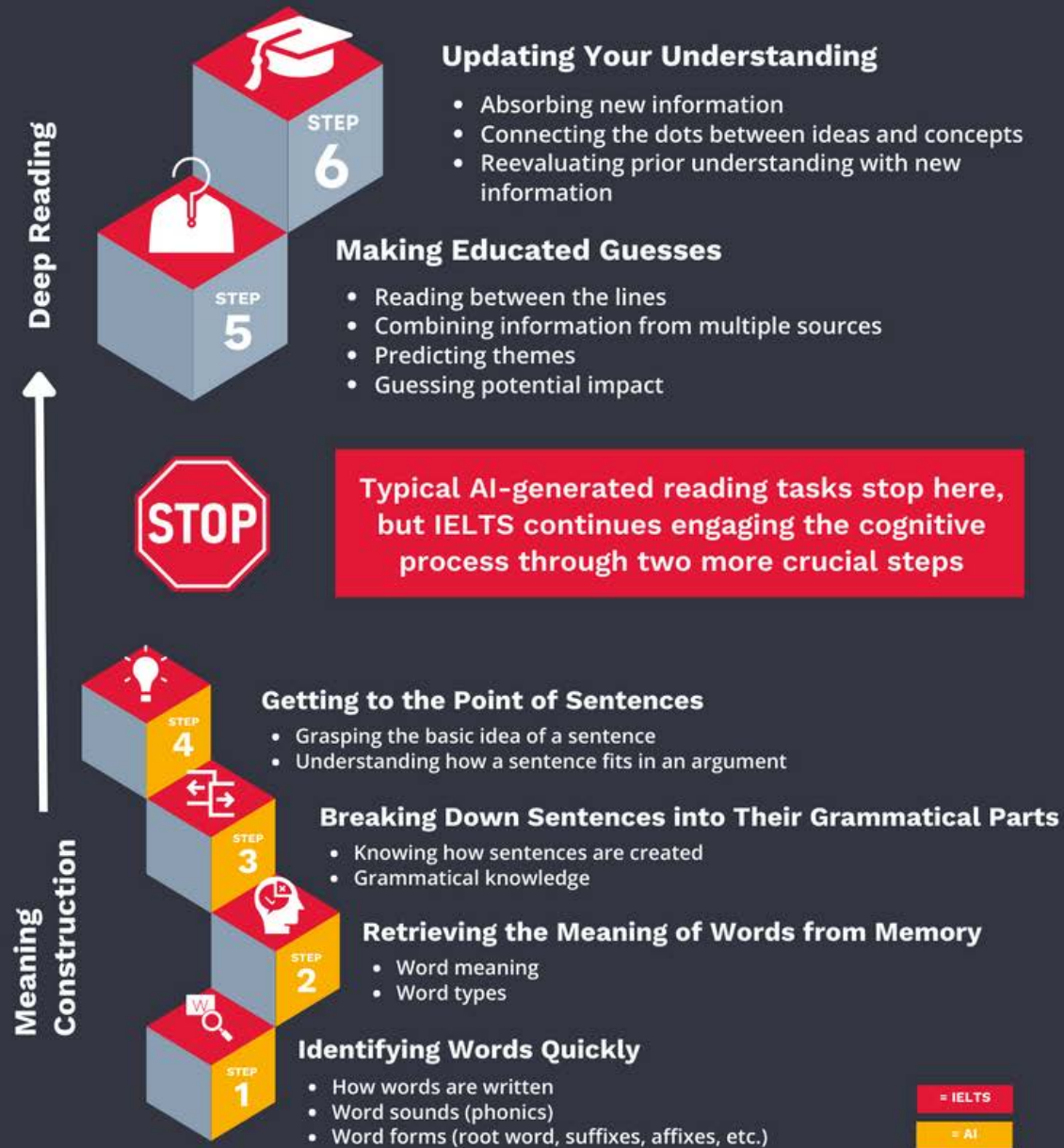
Reading is the **key** skill through which students explore new concepts and ideas, and through which new knowledge is developed.

Reading is a skill that impacts international students and all staff and faculty they engage with on campus. Reading is necessary to understand the course syllabi, assessment criteria, deadlines and other critical information about academic life that can make the difference between success and failure. Beyond attaining information about courses and campus life, reading is the KEY skill through which students explore new concepts and ideas, and through which new knowledge is developed. Faculty may find it challenging to address reading skill deficits while also focusing on the academic progress of all students.

Assessing these skills is not easy, nor can it be accomplished in a truncated period of time owing to the range of skills involved in academic reading. Understanding a student's ability to learn from and update their knowledge from reading is a foundational indicator of true reading skills.

Through the Reading assessment, IELTS supports institutions as a trusted and dependable partner. IELTS provides deep insight into how well a student can fully engage with reading passages to extract information, gain new insights, and learn new knowledge.

Engaging the Cognitive Processes of Reading: Comparing IELTS to AI-Generated Reading Tasks



Main Takeaways

- IELTS targets multiple reading goals including both skimming for overall comprehension and isolating specific details.
- IELTS enables depth of understanding, evaluating the reader's ability to make nuanced inferences and form a complete mental picture.
- IELTS includes summarization skills offering a more comprehensive evaluation of reading proficiency.

Students Committed to Academic Success Choose IELTS

Like institutions, students have a range of options when deciding which English proficiency test to take and accept.

Students that have made an investment in preparing for and taking IELTS are highly prepared for success within English medium programs. Because IELTS is so closely aligned with higher education expectations, the process of preparing for IELTS is not only a good indicator for admission, but for academic success. Unlike tests that evaluate sub-skills in isolation so that they can be easily machine-marked, IELTS tasks are authentic, relevant,

and the productive skills are marked by human experts.

When students take the IELTS test, they are not diverting their time and efforts to learn artificial skills that have little to no relevance in the higher education setting. With IELTS, they are learning English skills that will help them advance their learning within their selected discipline.

Students who send your institution an IELTS result are communicating more than a score — they are communicating that they are up to the challenge. They have not chosen a simpler path, but the path that will best support their success.

When students take the IELTS test, they are not diverting their time and efforts to learn artificial skills that have little to no relevance in the higher education setting.

A Shared Obligation to Student Success

IELTS provides institutions with a metric of language abilities that can be trusted. IELTS appreciates how consequential a student's investment to an international education is — and it is the reason why IELTS invests in the development and delivery of a robust assessment. IELTS will not invest in solutions that are less costly at the price of authenticity, relevance, and meaning.

By contrast, selecting and preparing for a weak language assessment can culminate in an academic experience fraught with confusion, miscommunication, and missed opportunities. Students may find themselves swimming against the current, ill-equipped for the demands of rigorous academic conversations, complex written tasks, and dynamic presentations. Accepting an inadequate language proficiency tool risks compromising the quality of discourse, curricular achievements, and the overarching reputation of the organization.

While there may be assessments on the market that promise quicker results, more entertaining formats, or easier pathways, the question institutions and students alike must ask is: at what cost?

It's crucial to understand that these shortcuts represent a trade-off with real-world relevance and depth. There is an inherent duty, both for educational institutions and language proficiency assessments, to ensure students are set up for success. In this crucial juncture of students' academic journey, superficiality cannot be afforded. The exponential effects of an inadequate evaluation can cascade into diminished self-confidence for the student and diluted academic quality for institutions.

IELTS will not invest in solutions that are less costly at the price of authenticity, relevance, and meaning.

IELTS believes that it benefits students and institutions to prioritize the real over the easy; this underscores IELTS' commitment to academic excellence. After all, when the stakes are this high, success is the only option.

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