

Your guide to understanding and using IELTS scores

How to set IELTS scores: helping your
institution and your students succeed



IELTS



Supporting your success

Welcome to Your guide
to understanding and
using IELTS scores

IELTS



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Press & Assessment

IELTS sets the standard for English language tests, helping people around the world achieve their professional, personal, and academic ambitions.

We know how important it is for organisations to have full confidence in applicants' English language skills.

We also know how important it is to set the right English language requirements for your organisation.

Setting the right English language requirements can be challenging. That's why we've produced this *Guide to understanding and using IELTS scores*.

This guide equips you with essential tools and information to help you set IELTS scores that align with your organisation's unique needs.

We know that applicants who aren't assessed correctly may struggle – academically and socially.

Accurate score-setting will give you the best chance of recruiting applicants who are most likely to do well – and will help you set them up for success.

The benefits of a robust score-setting process

By setting appropriate scores you can:

- ✓ make informed recruitment decisions efficiently
- ✓ recruit the most suitable applicants
- ✓ achieve good retention rates
- ✓ build a strong community of students or employees
- ✓ help ensure applicants succeed in the future.


13,500
organisations
globally trust the
IELTS test as a valid,
secure and reliable
indicator of English
language proficiency.

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Understanding IELTS



This section introduces you to the different IELTS tests. It explains why IELTS is fit for purpose, and sets out our IELTS 9-band scale of test scores.

Choosing the right IELTS test

There are two different IELTS tests, designed for specific purposes.

Both IELTS tests are made up of four sections, which test the four main language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

IELTS for UKVI test results are identical to standard IELTS tests. The only difference is that there are additional test venue security protocols for UK visa and immigration purposes.

IELTS Academic

IELTS Academic is designed for undergraduate and postgraduate applicants who plan to study at an institution where courses are delivered in English. The test can also be taken by individuals who are seeking professional registration.

IELTS General Training

IELTS General Training is aimed at individuals who plan to migrate to an English-speaking country and/or want to train or study below degree level.

This guide is focused on the IELTS Academic test.

We design tests to be fit for purpose

Understanding how an English language test is designed and what its purpose is will help you make a better evaluation of an applicant's test results.

Designed to suit your needs

IELTS Academic is designed to test the full range of essential communication skills that are required in a higher education or professional setting.

It reflects real-world English usage and includes many different types of questions, covering a wide range of language and contexts. This provides a direct indication of readiness.

Credibility and ongoing monitoring

Our approach to language testing is based on the most up-to-date thinking on language assessment and on our own extensive research and validation activities.

IELTS test questions are developed by English language experts across the globe. We screen and pre-test content, and constantly monitor results.

We publish detailed evidence to show that our IELTS test scores are consistent. All IELTS Examiners are specially trained, and their work is standardised and monitored to ensure this consistency.

Meeting European and international standards

The Q-mark, awarded by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), is a quality indicator that shows our IELTS tests have passed a rigorous ALTE audit and meet all the core requirements of ALTE's 18 quality standards.

These standards cover all stages of the language testing process including test construction, administration and logistics, marking and grading, test analysis, and communication with stakeholders.

This means educational institutions and employers can be confident that the IELTS tests meet strict professional standards and accurately reflect test takers' abilities.



IELTS tests are fair and flexible

IELTS ensures that its tests are accessible to all users worldwide, whatever their nationality, cultural background, gender, or specific needs.

Accessibility and fairness

Our commitment to accessibility and fairness ensures that IELTS is suitable for a wide range of test takers.

We sense-check our tests for potential biases or accessibility issues at every stage of development and implementation (including test design). This ensures cultural neutrality and appropriate accommodations for individuals with disabilities.

This means we can continue to reach millions of test takers every year around the globe.

Flexible solutions

IELTS Academic can be taken on computer at test centres all over the world or remotely using IELTS Online.

We have a wide range of services to make sure IELTS is fair for everyone. We can provide support for certain medical conditions, hearing and visual impairments, and specific learning difficulties.

This means you can trust that IELTS results are a fair measure of all applicants' English ability.



The four communication skills IELTS assesses

Each section of the IELTS Academic test is carefully designed so that tasks focus on the particular skill that the section is testing. We use a diverse range of tasks to activate the skills and abilities required on higher education courses.



IELTS Academic test

Listening (30 minutes)

- Four recorded monologues and conversations with 40 questions
- Parts 1 and 2 deal with everyday social situations
- Parts 3 and 4 deal with educational and training situations

Reading (60 minutes)

- Three long reading passages with a variety of tasks (40 questions)
- Texts range from descriptive and factual to discursive and analytical
- Includes non-verbal materials such as diagrams, graphs, or illustrations
- Texts are authentic (e.g. taken from books, journals, magazines, and newspapers)

Writing (60 minutes)

- In Task 1, test takers must describe some visual information (a table, graph, chart, or diagram) in at least 150 words
- In Task 2, they are given a point of view, argument, or problem to discuss in at least 250 words

Speaking (11-14 minutes)

- Interview with a human examiner in three parts
- In Part 1, test takers are asked about themselves and familiar topics such as home, family, work, studies, or interests
- In Parts 2 and 3, test takers speak about and discuss their opinions at length on a given topic

Understanding IELTS



Assessing listening skills

The Listening section includes a range of **questions at different levels** of difficulty. There are 40 questions in total. One mark is awarded for each correct answer.

IELTS uses a **variety of task types** to test a wide range of listening skills. These include the abilities to:

- identify main ideas and specific factual details
- recognise speakers' opinions and attitudes
- understand the purpose behind what someone says
- follow how ideas develop throughout a conversation.

The test will include **question types selected from:**

- multiple-choice questions
- matching information
- diagram labelling
- note completion
- sentence completion
- short-answer questions.

A **variety of voices** and different accents are used.



Assessing reading skills

There are 40 questions which **range in difficulty**.

Different types of questions test a **wide range of reading skills**. These include:

- reading for general understanding
- reading for main ideas
- reading for detail
- skimming, understanding logical argument
- understanding inferences and implied meaning
- recognising writers' opinions, attitudes and purpose.





Assessing writing skills

Test takers must write their responses to the Writing tasks in an **academic or semi-formal/neutral style**.

To ensure that the sample of language can be fully evaluated across all assessment criteria, responses must be **written in full**. Notes are not acceptable, and points will be deducted for overly brief answers.

Key criteria for Writing

The Writing tasks are assessed according to these **four criteria**:

- Task Achievement (for Task 1) or Task Response (Task 2)
- Coherence and Cohesion
- Lexical Resource
- Grammatical Range and Accuracy.



Assessing speaking skills

The Speaking section assesses applicants' ability to **create meaningful interactions**. This includes using, speaking, and understanding English in **discussions about a range of topics** in person or face-to-face via video call.

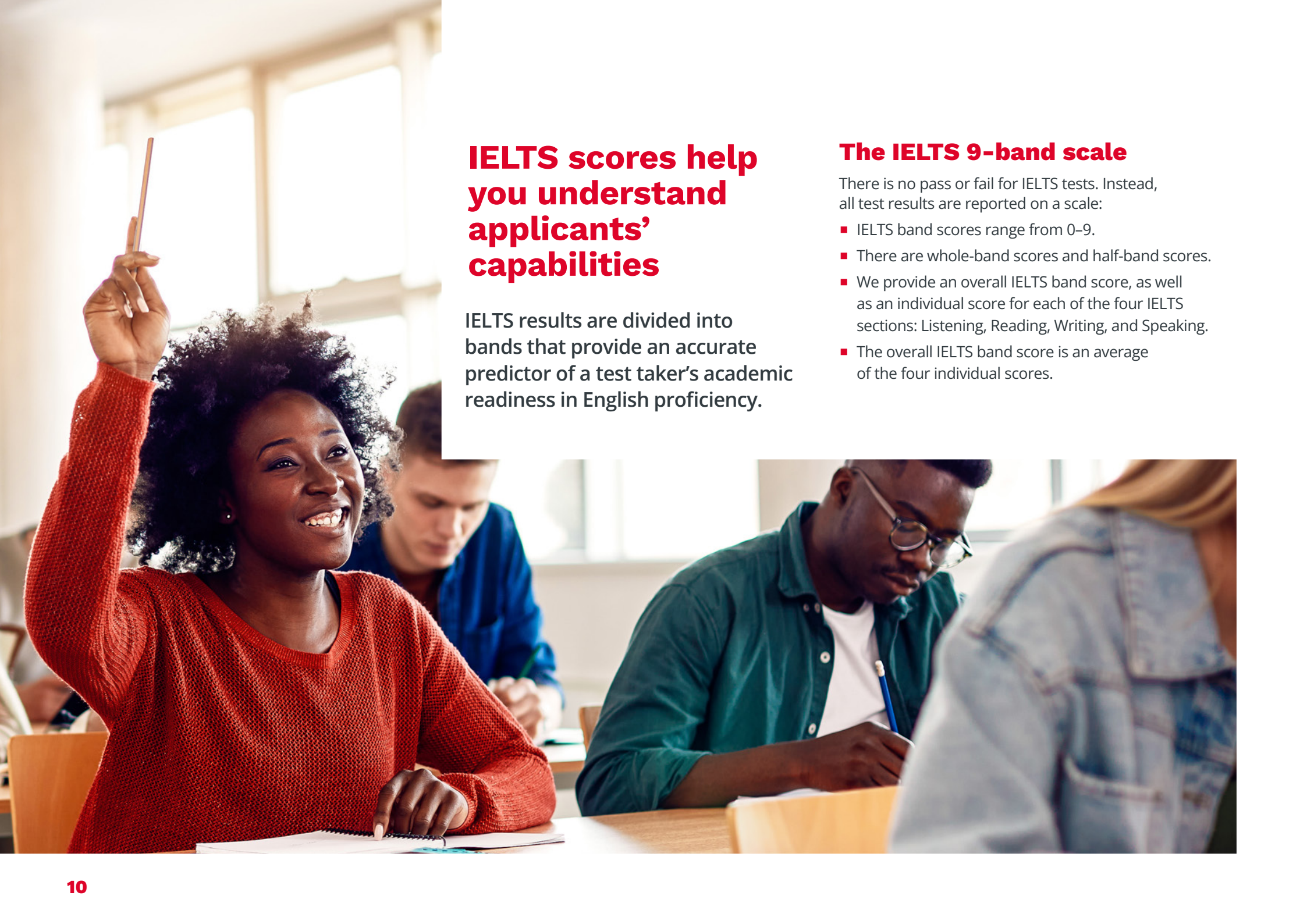
Each part of the Speaking section assesses speaking ability in different ways.

The tasks are delivered in a way that **does not allow test takers to rehearse** set responses beforehand. All parts are recorded.

Key criteria for Speaking

Speaking is assessed according to these **four criteria**:

- Fluency and Coherence
- Lexical Resource
- Grammatical Range and Accuracy
- Pronunciation.



IELTS scores help you understand applicants' capabilities

IELTS results are divided into bands that provide an accurate predictor of a test taker's academic readiness in English proficiency.

The IELTS 9-band scale

There is no pass or fail for IELTS tests. Instead, all test results are reported on a scale:

- IELTS band scores range from 0–9.
- There are whole-band scores and half-band scores.
- We provide an overall IELTS band score, as well as an individual score for each of the four IELTS sections: Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking.
- The overall IELTS band score is an average of the four individual scores.

Understanding IELTS

Use our IELTS band score descriptions

The table provides detailed descriptions of what each IELTS whole-band test score means in terms of an applicant's English language proficiency.

This provides you with key insights to align each of your courses with the appropriate IELTS band scores. This will help ensure that applicants have the necessary English skills to support them in their future studies.

IELTS Band score	Skill level	Description
9	Expert	The test taker has fully operational command of the language. Their use of English is appropriate, accurate and fluent, and shows complete understanding.
8	Very good	The test taker has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriate usage. They may misunderstand some things in unfamiliar situations. They handle complex and detailed argumentation well.
7	Good	The test taker has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings in some situations. They generally handle complex language well and understand detailed reasoning.
6	Competent	The test taker has an effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings. They can use and understand reasonably complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
5	Modest	The test taker has a partial command of the language and copes with overall meaning in most situations, although they are likely to make many mistakes. They should be able to handle basic communication in their own field.
4	Limited	The test taker's basic competence is limited to familiar situations. They frequently show problems in understanding and expression.
3	Extremely limited	The test taker conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. There are frequent breakdowns in communication.
2	Intermittent	The test taker has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
1	Non-user	The test taker has no ability to use the language except a few isolated words.
0	Did not attempt the test	The test taker did not answer the questions.



IELTS scores align with CEFR levels

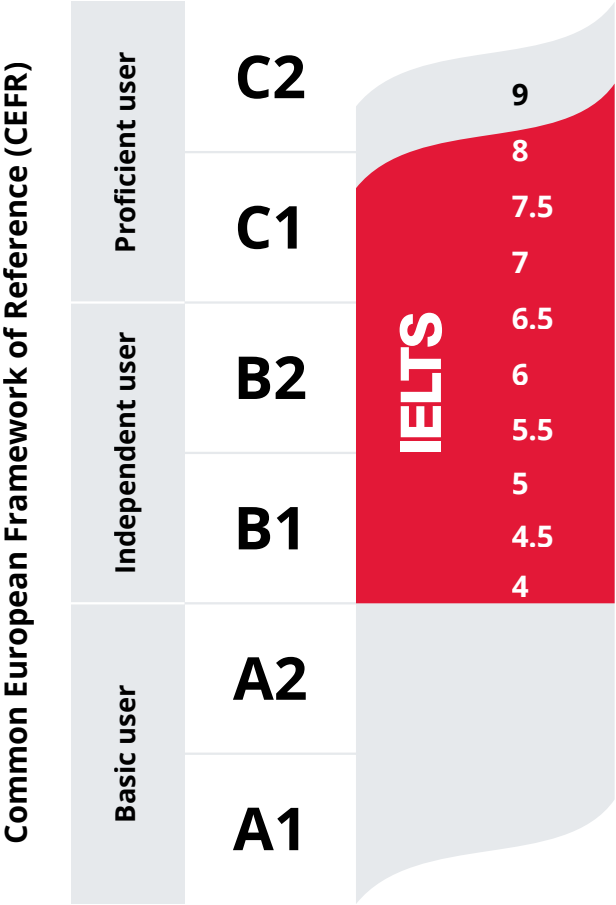
CEFR levels can be a useful tool in understanding IELTS scores.

The CEFR: an international standard

The Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability which can be applied to any language. It organises language proficiency into six levels (A1 to C2).

Mapping IELTS to the CEFR

IELTS and the CEFR are designed for different purposes (IELTS is a standardised test with a proficiency scoring system and the CEFR is a framework), so it is not possible to make one-to-one comparisons. However, you may find this diagram useful to see how IELTS band scores can be aligned to CEFR levels.



CEFR levels and IELTS overall band scores

Key IELTS resources to help you set your scores

We provide resources on our website that are key to helping you make informed decisions about score-setting. These materials explain how IELTS assesses language skills and what language levels to expect from your applicants.



Receptive skills: Listening and Reading

These skills involve understanding and interpreting information. Test takers must demonstrate their ability to understand, interpret, and extract meaning from spoken and written English.

Our resources include:

- **Sample Questions with Answer Keys** – demonstrates how we assess a test taker's ability to comprehend and process information.

Productive skills: Writing and Speaking

These skills involve producing and expressing language. Test takers must show their ability to construct responses, organise ideas, and communicate with accuracy and fluency.

Our resources include:

- **Marking Criteria** – guidance on how answers are assessed and marked.
- **Band Score Descriptors** – criteria explaining what performance looks like at each level.
- **Authentic Sample Answers** – real test taker answers across different band scores.
- **Examiner Comments** – insights explaining why responses received specific scores.

5 steps to setting IELTS scores

Follow our expert advice and guidance to help you set and interpret test scores that drive success for your applicants and your organisation.



01

Form a decision-making group



02

Review your score-setting and gather evidence

A photograph of three women in a professional setting. A woman with long brown hair and glasses, wearing a red sweater, is leaning over a laptop. A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a black top, is pointing at the laptop screen. A woman with long dark hair and glasses, wearing a green cardigan, is looking on. The background is a light-colored wall.

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Run your score-setting
workshop

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Communicate your
test scores

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Use the IELTS
Results Service

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STEP 1

Form a decision-making group

Your decision-making group can give you multiple perspectives on the English language skills that prospective students will need.

Plan ahead before your peak recruitment cycle

Whether your organisation is already using IELTS or you are setting IELTS scores for the first time, you will need to think about reviewing and setting your entry requirements for applicants well ahead of your peak recruitment season.

Draw on long-term employees and new staff

It will be useful to include staff with knowledge of your existing English language policy, as well as new staff who will need to become familiar with current requirements.

These new staff may be able to bring a fresh perspective from their experiences at other organisations.

When to review scoring

Regularly review your test score requirements. Changes that might trigger a review include:

-  changes to courses
-  staff changes
-  a new organisation strategy
-  changes to student outcomes.



Building your decision-making group

Here is an example of the expert colleagues that your decision-making group might include from across your organisation and what these different representatives could contribute.

Admissions and recruitment staff;

know the applicant market landscape.

provide valuable data on past applicants, admissions trends and the score-setting of competing universities.

want to feel confident that scores set will not prevent them from recruiting the number of students they need to fill the places available.

English language centre staff;

know about language assessment and pedagogy.

provide advice on interpreting applicants' scores and what additional language support students might need.

want to know who will deliver any additional support required.

Deans, chairs, and other faculty staff;

know the content of the courses they offer.

provide a detailed understanding of what language skills a student will need for each course.

want to be confident that a student's level of language proficiency won't detrimentally affect their results.

Support and wellbeing staff;

know about issues that can affect a student's ability to study and thrive at university.

provide insights into the needs and challenges of international students beyond the classroom.

want reassurance that scores set won't adversely affect student wellbeing and put extra pressure on support services.



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STEP 2

Review your score-setting and gather evidence

To get the best out of your decision-making group, your members will need to do some preparation before you meet.

Circulate your current guidance

It is important that all members of your group are familiar with your existing score-setting guidance, so this guidance should be circulated and reviewed by individual members before you get together.

Check when your institution last set this guidance and what processes were previously taken to set the scores.

Take an evidence-based approach

Faculty representatives may want to conduct focus groups with faculty colleagues and consult international students ahead of your group's meeting. Student support staff may also want to consult students beforehand.

Alternatively, your organisation might consider directly including international students in the decision-making group so that everyone hears their perspectives firsthand.

Group members are also advised to analyse your own organisation's data on past international students' retention rates and academic performance, setting these against students' English language proficiency test scores.



IELTS guidance for educational institutions

There are lots of factors that affect a student’s performance beyond English language ability, but here’s our quick-start guide to setting IELTS scores for higher education courses that will help your students thrive.



IELTS scale score	Linguistically demanding academic courses	Linguistically less demanding academic courses	Linguistically demanding training courses	Linguistically less demanding training courses
7.5–9	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
7.0	Probably acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
6.5	English study needed	Probably acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
6.0	English study needed	English study needed	Probably acceptable	Acceptable
5.5	English study needed	English study needed	English study needed	Probably acceptable



Remember to use our key resources to understand more about IELTS band scores when you are making decisions about score-setting - see [page 13](#) of this guide.



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STEP 2

The limitations of making test comparisons

While we understand that being able to compare the test scores from different test providers can be useful when score-setting, it's important to understand the limitations.

If you do use concordance or comparison tables, they should not be used in isolation, and you should always make sure they come from a reliable source.

Tests are different – Tests vary in their design, purpose, and format. Some tests are more focused on knowledge than on proficiency. The marking criteria for the assessments of different test providers also differ. This means it can be very difficult to make accurate comparisons or provide credible concordance data. It can be like trying to compare apples with oranges.

Tests can change – Test providers can make changes to their tests which means concordance or comparison data may not always be up to date or correct.

Both limitations mean you run the risk of setting inappropriate scores and applicants may try and look for the 'easiest' option. This in turn can significantly affect student wellbeing, academic success, and the reputation of your organisation.

From our in-depth research we know which tests can be compared with IELTS and how.

"Considering the nuances of different assessments, engaging stakeholders, and analysing academic performance in addition to graduation rate, can foster a vibrant and inclusive community where all students can thrive."



Mary Hunter

Executive Director of Global Initiatives, Cal State Stanislaus

STEP 2

The negative impacts of inconsistent score-setting

Research found that minimum English proficiency requirements vary widely across university degrees and the professions they lead to. This can have serious implications.

Key findings

Research by Dr Amanda Müller and Andrew Brenner found:

- the minimum scores set by universities were **often lower** than those set by related professions
- the way different organisations compared the scores of different tests **varied**
- some universities and professions set **lower minimum scores than recommended** by test providers.

Use our support

This research, jointly funded by the IELTS Partners, raises **serious concerns** about the negative impacts of setting inappropriate English proficiency scores.

If a student enters university with a score that is lower than the minimum score recommended for their chosen profession, **students may fail to qualify** for that profession after university.

The research acts as a reminder to leverage the support we can offer you on setting minimum language requirements.



Find out more about score-setting and comparing tests in our IELTS Research Report:

Benchmarking English standards across professions and professional university degrees

[IELTS.org/BenchmarkingEnglishStandards](https://ielts.org/BenchmarkingEnglishStandards)



STEP 3

Run a score-setting workshop

Following your research, discuss your thoughts and findings with your decision-making group so you can agree on your English language proficiency requirements.

Key points to consider

-  the demands placed on language ability in your organisation.
-  the volume and quality of applicants you are likely to attract.
-  the type and level of language skills required for tasks such as giving presentations, carrying out research, or teaching.
-  whether lowering score requirements may lead to lower completion rates and lower final grades.
-  the level of English required by students for the profession they are working towards – will the jump from university to employment be too great?



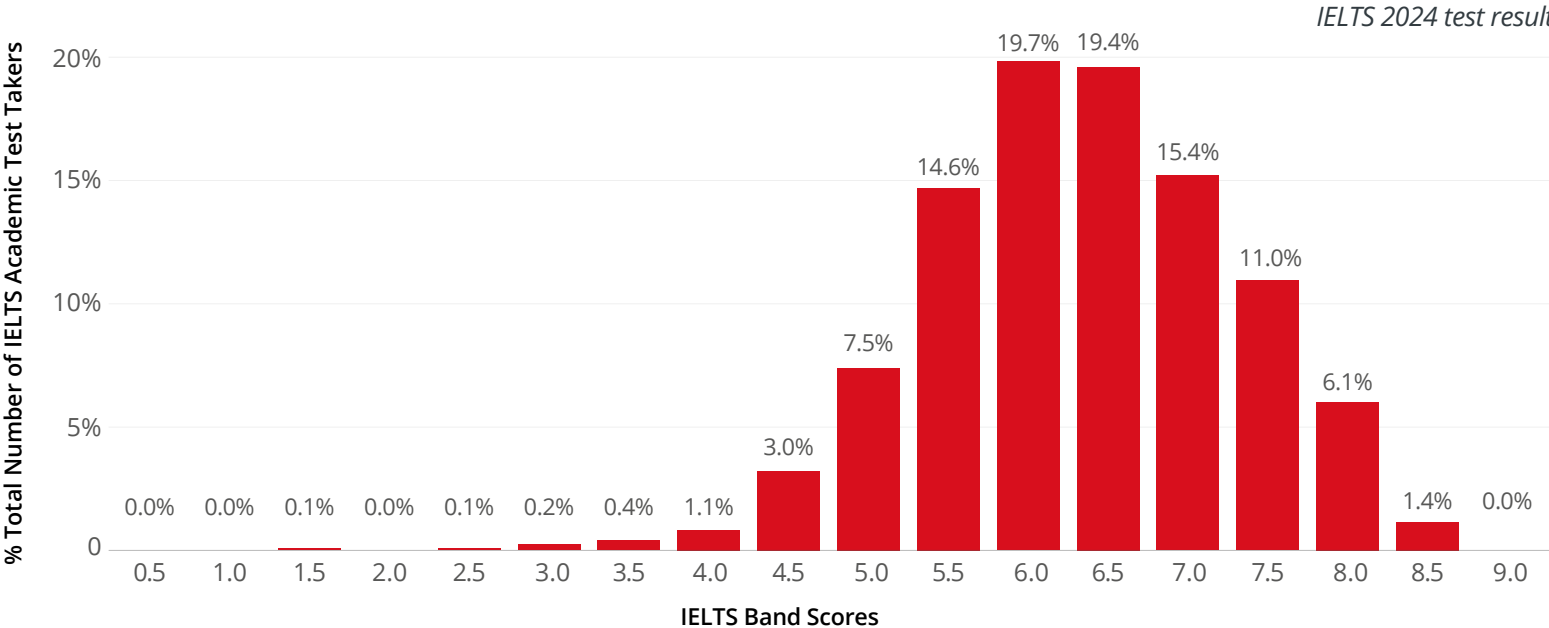
Consider if the demands of your course or your organisation's strategy has changed since you last reviewed your scores.



Have confidence in IELTS results

Every year, millions of IELTS tests are taken around the world. Our data shows that over half of our IELTS Academic test takers reach an IELTS band score of 6.5 or above.

This demonstrates that without adjusting scores, universities will already have access to a huge pool of high-quality applicants.



Set scores to attract the quality of students you want

Lowering a required IELTS score by half a band could compromise the quality of your applicants and have a negative impact on outcomes for your students and for your organisation.

Consider variations in language learning

The time required to learn a language varies significantly depending on individual and contextual factors. This makes it difficult for an organisation to estimate how much language learning support a student will need if the required entry scores are lowered.

Discuss language learning hours

If you set lower scores than those recommended by test providers:

- be prepared that students may need additional language support
- discuss who will deliver this support and how.



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STEP 4

Communicate your test scores

After you set your scores, you will want to communicate your English language proficiency requirements. This needs to be



done internally and externally.

Internal communication

Share your English language proficiency requirements with your team members and other colleagues using all available internal communications channels.

External communication

Update your website and social media channels to communicate your English language proficiency requirements to prospective students and other stakeholders who may have an interest.

Make sure you clearly state that you require applicants to take IELTS Academic or IELTS for UKVI Academic.

Tell the IELTS team

Don't forget to inform us about any score changes so we can update our website information.

***"I was able to log in,
download the scores
and forward them to
our admissions team.
This has really helped us
speed up the application
process. Love it!"***



Rajesh Adhikari
International Student Services,
Ramapo College New Jersey



**Find out how you can
easily receive IELTS scores**



STEP 5

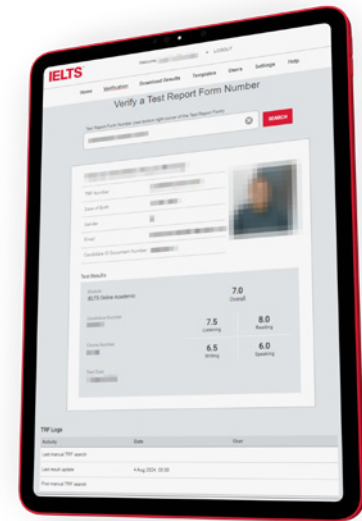
Use the IELTS Results Service

Use the IELTS Results Service to check applicants' IELTS test scores.

Verify test taker scores

Test takers receive an IELTS Test Report Form as official confirmation and proof of their test results.

Register for the IELTS Results Service and you will be able to look up results and review them on screen or download the results and import them into your organisation's own system. You can even download results in bulk to save time, which can speed up the recruitment process.



Verifying an IELTS Test Report Form





Check your applicants' IELTS test results are still valid

Language skills can change if not kept up to date.

Proof of language ability

We recommend that an IELTS Test Report Form is only accepted if it is no more than two years old.

However, if an applicant has proof that they have actively maintained or improved their English proficiency, your organisation may choose to accept a result that is over two years old.

Let applicants know how you'd like to verify their IELTS scores

Make sure your policy on accepting IELTS results is clear. If you would like to receive all applicants' IELTS test results electronically, you can state this on your website. You could use the following sample text as a guide.

Sample text for your institution's website

We require all applicants who do not have relevant qualifications in English to demonstrate their English language proficiency as part of our admissions process. Prospective students can demonstrate proficiency using the IELTS Academic test.

We require an overall band score of **{insert score}** or higher.

Your results should be sent to our IELTS Results Service account electronically by your test centre.

You will need to provide them with the following information to ensure your results are delivered correctly:

{insert details, e.g. institution's IELTS Results Service account name}

No hard copy or emailed Test Report Forms are accepted.

An institution code for IELTS is NOT required.



Contact us

We're always here to support you.

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The world's most trusted English test



Our global partnership

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