

IELTS

2026

IELTS Voices

Insights into the motivations,
experiences and outcomes of
English language test takers



BRITISH
COUNCIL



CAMBRIDGE
English

IELTS is jointly owned by the British Council; IDP IELTS; and Cambridge University Press & Assessment

8,395 test takers.

165 countries.

The largest study of its kind exploring the motivations, experiences and outcomes of IELTS test takers.

This research tells their story.

IELTS Voices goes beyond scale. It provides a test taker view of decision-making at a critical moment, as people compare destinations, navigate requirements and choose pathways for study, work and migration.

For governments, education providers and policymakers, the findings offer evidence to help create clearer, more effective pathways for internationally mobile learners and professionals.

Enabled by the global reach of the British Council, IDP IELTS, and Cambridge University Press & Assessment, the research offers a distinctive perspective across the world's major mobility corridors.



Contents

Foreword	3
Executive summary	4
Research background, objectives and methodology	5
Demographics	8
Results	11
Recommendations	19
Conclusion	20
Resources and further support	21
References	22

Foreword

International mobility is often discussed through the lens of policy, participation and opportunity. Behind these trends, however, are people making important decisions about their futures. Drawing on the perspectives of 8,395 recent and prospective IELTS test takers across 165 countries, *IELTS Voices* highlights both the diversity of experiences and the shared aspirations that shape international mobility today. Understanding those different journeys is essential if we are to move beyond assumptions and create pathways that reflect the realities people face.

Andrew Mackenzie

Commercial Director, Higher Education, British Council

IELTS Voices provides a unique perspective on how global test takers make decisions at a time of growing complexity and choice. The results show that people are ambitious and seeking recognised qualifications, clarity on requirements and flexible pathways that keep their options open. We hope this research encourages the sector to keep listening to test takers and to better understand the choices they make, the challenges they face and the support they need to pursue international opportunities.

Simon Emmett

Chief Partner Officer, IDP Education

The findings highlight the role English language proficiency plays in preparing people for what comes next. Many respondents in the *IELTS Voices* survey reported that preparing for their test helped build confidence, strengthen communication skills and equipped them for study, work and migration. This reminds us that English language learning is not simply about meeting a requirement, but about helping people develop skills that will empower them throughout their lives.

Francesca Woodward

**Global Managing Director, English,
Cambridge University Press & Assessment**

Test takers are navigating a complex global landscape.

Executive summary

IELTS Voices is the largest study of its kind, bringing together insights from 8,395 test takers and prospective test takers across 165 countries. Delivered through the global partnership of the British Council, IDP IELTS and Cambridge University Press & Assessment, it provides robust evidence on how IELTS test takers navigate English language testing in pursuit of study, work and migration opportunities.

IELTS Voices was developed to bring the voice of the test taker into conversations about international education, employment and migration. IELTS will continue this research annually, tracking how test taker needs evolve.

Conducted between March and April 2026, the research explores the motivations, experiences and decisions shaping international mobility. It reveals an increasingly complex landscape in which test takers evaluate multiple destinations and pathways, with recognition, confidence and flexibility emerging as key drivers of test choice.

Across markets and pathways, four key themes emerged:

1. Recognition enables flexibility across complex global pathways

Test takers prioritise tests accepted by the widest range of institutions, employers and governments.

2. Preparation supports readiness and progression

Many test takers view test preparation as contributing to communication skills, confidence and future success.

3. Outcomes matter as much as, if not more than, cost

Confidence in achieving study, work and migration goals is a stronger driver than cost alone.

4. Test taker journeys vary across markets and pathways

Needs, motivations, barriers and longer-term aspirations differ across markets, destinations, pathways and individual circumstances.

What this means for institutions

IELTS test takers prepare seriously, choose recognition and value outcomes over price, but no two journeys are alike.

For your institution:

- Be visible. Make IELTS and other accepted English language tests and required scores easy to find.
- Value readiness, not just results. Recognise that test preparation helps applicants build the skills needed to succeed at your institution.
- Tailor your support. Use local knowledge and data insights to better understand how needs vary by market and pathway.

Research background, objectives and methodology

Background

As international mobility continues to evolve, understanding the perspectives of test takers is becoming increasingly important for governments, higher education institutions, employers and the many organisations that use English language test results.

Across major destination markets, policymakers are introducing measures designed to manage migration levels, strengthen compliance requirements and increase selectivity across student and skilled migration programmes. Recent changes include higher visa costs in Australia¹, stricter compliance requirements² and higher English language standards in the UK³, and ongoing measures in Canada⁴ and the United States⁵ affecting international student mobility. At the same time, other destinations, such as New Zealand⁶, are seeking to attract international students and skilled migrants, while new markets, such as Germany, continue to emerge.

Against this backdrop, rather than committing to a single destination or pathway, many test takers are seeking to preserve future opportunities across multiple countries and life goals. Factors such as recognition, flexibility and long-term value are therefore playing a growing role in decision-making.

Policy changes are reshaping international education and migration choices.

Research objectives

IELTS Voices was established to better understand the motivations, experiences and expectations of people navigating study, work and migration pathways. By capturing the perspectives of test takers directly, the research contributes evidence and insights to support informed decision-making across governments, higher education institutions, employers and the wider international education sector.



- 1 [Australian Government – Study Australia: Student visa application charge increase](#)
- 2 [GOV.UK – UK Visas and Immigration \(UKVI\): Student sponsor compliance](#)
- 3 [GOV.UK – UK Visas and Immigration \(UKVI\): English language requirements](#)
- 4 [Government of Canada: 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan](#)
- 5 [US Department of State: Expanded screening and vetting for visa applicants](#)
- 6 [New Zealand Immigration: Changes to the Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa](#)

The study was designed to:

1

Understand decision-making and motivations

Explore why IELTS test takers choose to take an English language test and the factors that influence their decisions, including recognition, accessibility, preparation support and perceived value.

2

Assess outcomes and progression

Examine how IELTS test takers use their test results and the extent to which English language testing supports progress towards their intended study, work or migration goals.

3

Explore recognition and confidence

Assess the importance of test recognition among educational institutions, employers and governments, and examine IELTS test taker awareness and understanding of language requirements.

4

Identify barriers and challenges

Investigate the practical, financial and structural obstacles IELTS test takers may face when pursuing international opportunities.

5

Identify global and regional trends

Analyse common experiences across IELTS test taker groups while highlighting important regional and market-level differences.

Methodology



Global online survey conducted between 19 March and 17 April 2026



8,395 respondents across 165 countries



Included recent and prospective IELTS test takers



Survey length: approximately 15 minutes



Recruited through IDP IELTS, British Council and IELTS USA networks

Interpreting the findings

As with all research of this kind, a few limitations define how the findings should be read:

Self-reported: Responses reflect test takers' own perceptions and intentions, not measured outcomes.

IELTS test takers: Respondents were recent or prospective IELTS test takers. For the purposes of this research, "recent" refers to individuals who have taken IELTS within the past two years. The findings reflect these two groups rather than all English language learners more broadly and should be interpreted in that context.

Point-in-time: Data was collected in March–April 2026 and may shift as policies and mobility conditions change.

Intentions, not actions: Some findings reflect what respondents plan to do, which may differ from their eventual choices.

Demographics

Respondents represent a diverse mix of intended destinations, nationalities and reasons for taking IELTS.

A survey of 8,395 respondents

Test takers

Took IELTS no more than two years ago



Prospects

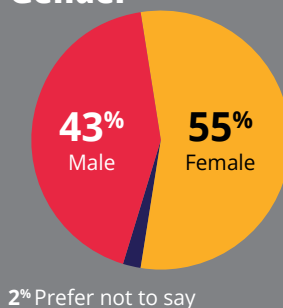
Planning to take IELTS in the future



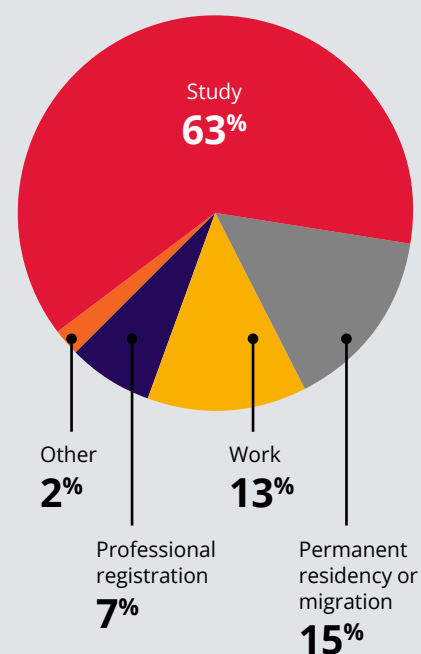
Test takers from IDP IELTS, British Council and IELTS USA test centres



Gender



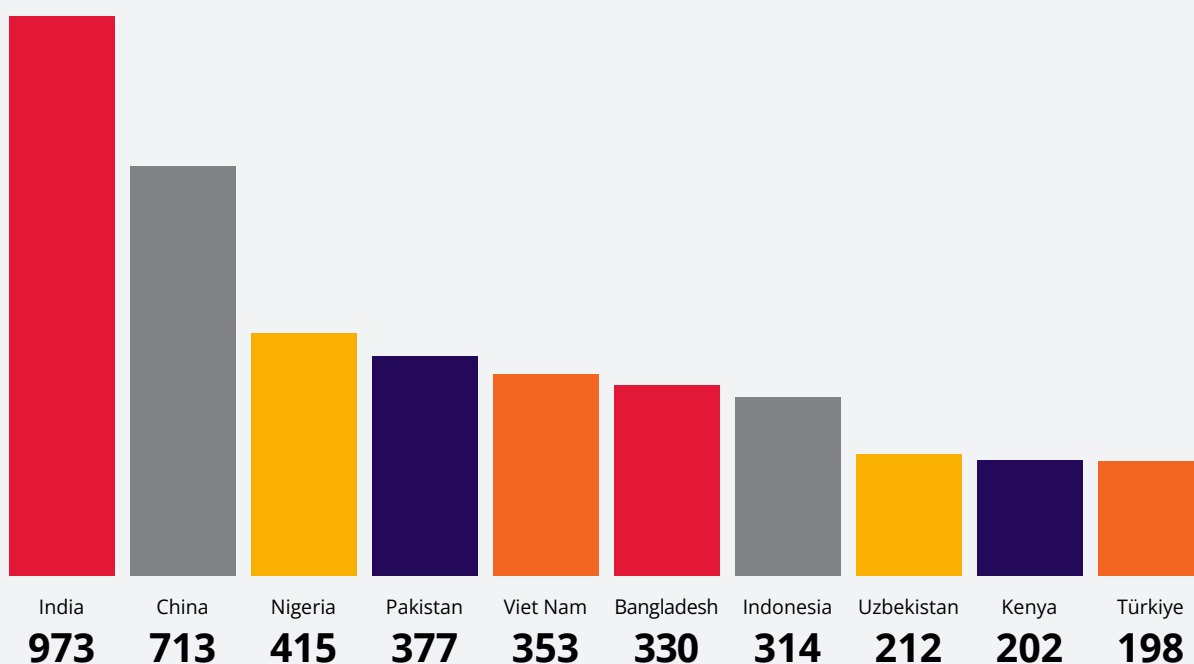
Reason for taking IELTS



Nationality

Top 10 nationalities

Respondents representing 165 nationalities participated in the survey

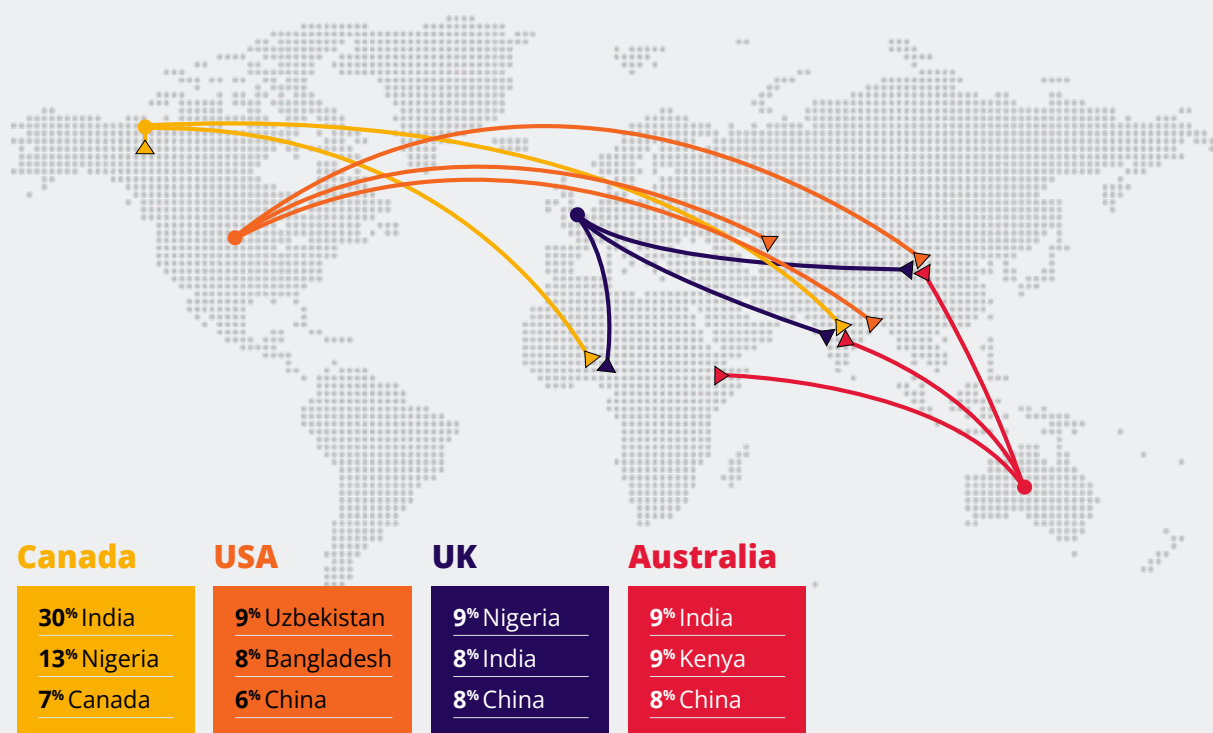


Intended destination



Intended destination of IELTS test takers varies by source market

In which country do you intend to use your IELTS score?





Results

Across markets and test-taking purposes, the findings reveal how IELTS test takers are responding to a more complex and uncertain international mobility environment. As future pathways become less predictable, flexibility, preparedness and confidence are becoming increasingly important drivers of decision-making.

1. Recognition enables flexibility across complex global pathways

Test takers are considering multiple destinations for study, work and migration, reflecting a more competitive and complex global mobility landscape. Among respondents who took or plan to take IELTS for study purposes, four in ten (42%) would consider multiple study destinations.

In this environment, recognition matters because it helps test takers keep options open. It was the most important factor influencing test choice (82%), with respondents prioritising tests accepted by the widest range of institutions and authorities.

Recognition is more than acceptance. It gives test takers confidence that their results will be understood, accepted and transferable across different pathways. When English language requirements are difficult to find, inconsistent across channels or hard to verify, comparing options becomes more challenging and prospective students may rule out opportunities that would otherwise be a good fit.

Clear, visible and consistent information about accepted tests and required scores helps prospective applicants compare pathways and make informed decisions with confidence.

Wide acceptance matters most when choosing an English language test

When choosing an English language test, which of the following would you prioritise most, if you could only choose one?



n=7,989: single response

Required scores and application pathways were among the hardest requirements to understand

Which parts of the English language requirements were hardest for you to understand?

Minimum English score requirements

28%



Understanding different application routes (e.g. study, work, migration)

25%



Validity period of test scores

24%



Visa rules related to English testing (e.g. required scores, test types)

24%



Which tests are required for my application?

15%

n=3,830; multiple response



“”

Nowadays, it's really important to have a second language and to be able to certify it.

Test taker from Colombia, studying in the UK

2. Preparation builds readiness and progression

For many IELTS test takers, preparation⁷ delivers benefits that extend beyond achieving a required score. Participants reported improvements in communication skills, confidence and readiness to use English in academic, professional and everyday settings as a result of preparing for their IELTS test.

These findings add a test taker perspective to the broader evidence on “positive washback”⁸, showing that effective assessment can support language development, lasting study habits and readiness for real-world use. Research has also found that IELTS Writing tasks strongly overlap with English for Academic Purposes (EAP)⁹, suggesting that preparation can help students develop skills that are directly relevant to university study.

Higher education institutions should track outcomes across accepted tests to better understand the relationship between preparation, achievement, progression and long-term success.

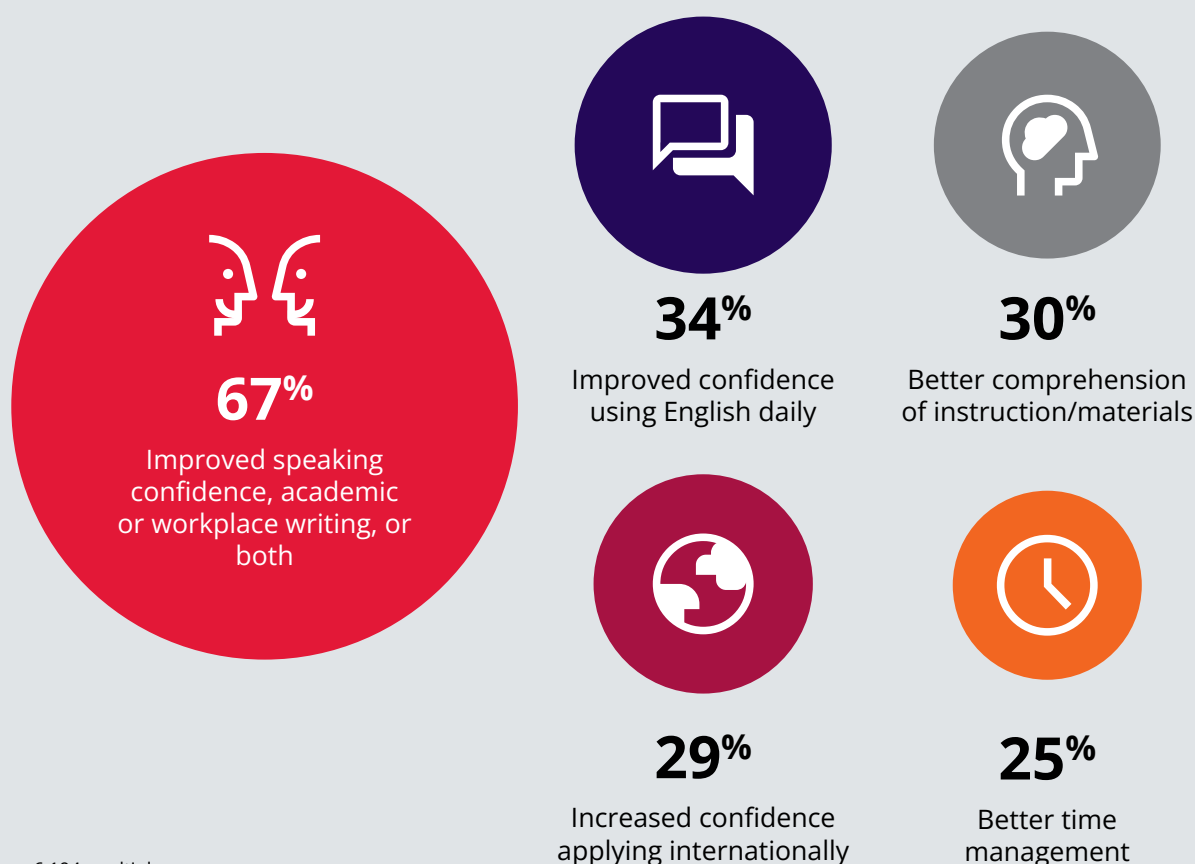


Other than helping me get into university, IELTS gave me confidence to communicate.

Test taker from India, studying in Australia

Preparation for IELTS delivers tangible improvements, particularly in communication and confidence

Which improvements did you personally experience from preparing for IELTS?



⁷ IELTS – News: [Preparing for an English test](#)

⁸ IELTS – News: [The right language test](#)

⁹ EAPFoundation.com: [What is EAP?](#)

3. Outcomes matter more than cost

When choosing between accepted tests, test takers weigh cost against their perceived likelihood of achieving successful outcomes across the pathways they are considering.

Nearly nine in ten respondents indicated that achieving successful outcomes is equally or more important than selecting the cheapest test option.

This highlights the importance of recognition, trust and perceived effectiveness in test takers' decision-making. The qualities valued by test takers, including credibility, confidence and long-term outcomes, suggest a cohort focused not simply on gaining admission, but on maximising their chances of academic and professional success. These are characteristics that institutions typically seek to cultivate and support throughout the student journey.

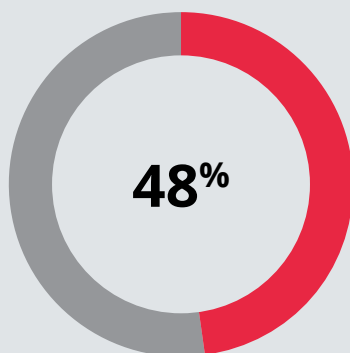
“”

The writing skills were so useful that I could have used them for my university entrance exams.

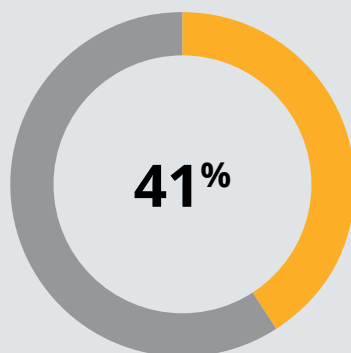
Test taker from Vietnam, studying in Australia

Confidence in achieving goals outweighs choosing the cheapest test option

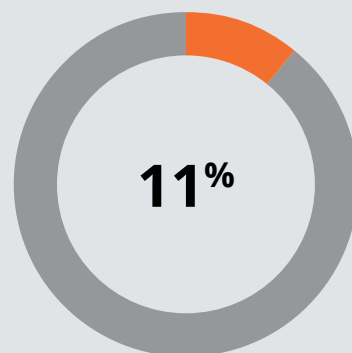
If two English tests were both accepted for your application, which statement best reflects how you would decide?



Both cost and achieving my desired goals are equally important to me



I would choose the test I believe gives me the best chance of success, even if it costs me more



I would choose the cheaper test, even if I felt less confident about achieving my desired goals

n=7,838; single response



4. Test taker journeys vary across markets and pathways

While common themes emerge globally, test taker priorities, challenges and outcomes vary across markets and pathways.

Among respondents from both China and Taiwan, 31% found visa-related English-language requirements difficult to understand, while 36% of applicants from both Pakistan and Nigeria found test score validity unclear.

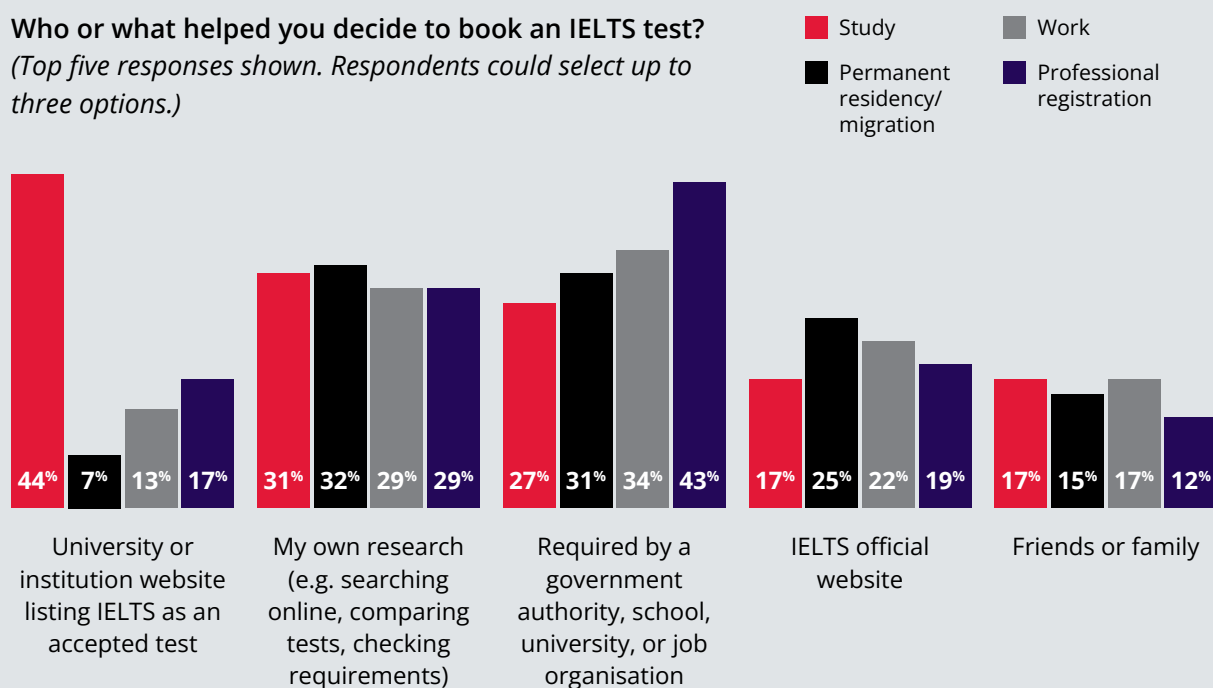
Test takers also rely on different sources of information depending on their goals. Among those taking IELTS for study purposes, seeing IELTS listed on a university or institution website was the most influential factor in booking their test (44%), highlighting the importance of clear and visible recognition by institutions.

Differences are also evident in intended length of stay. Among those taking IELTS for study purposes, 41% of respondents from India intended to stay in their destination country for three to five years, compared with 26% from China. This paints a picture of different expectations of post-study opportunities and longer-term mobility pathways, offering an important perspective for policymakers and institutions.

For policymakers and recognising organisations, these differences matter. The findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to communication, outreach and support is unlikely to reflect the realities of today's test takers. As pathways become more varied and decision-making more complex, organisations will need to draw on data insights that capture not only common trends, but also the important differences that shape people's choices, experiences and ambitions.

Drivers of IELTS booking decisions vary significantly by test-taking purpose

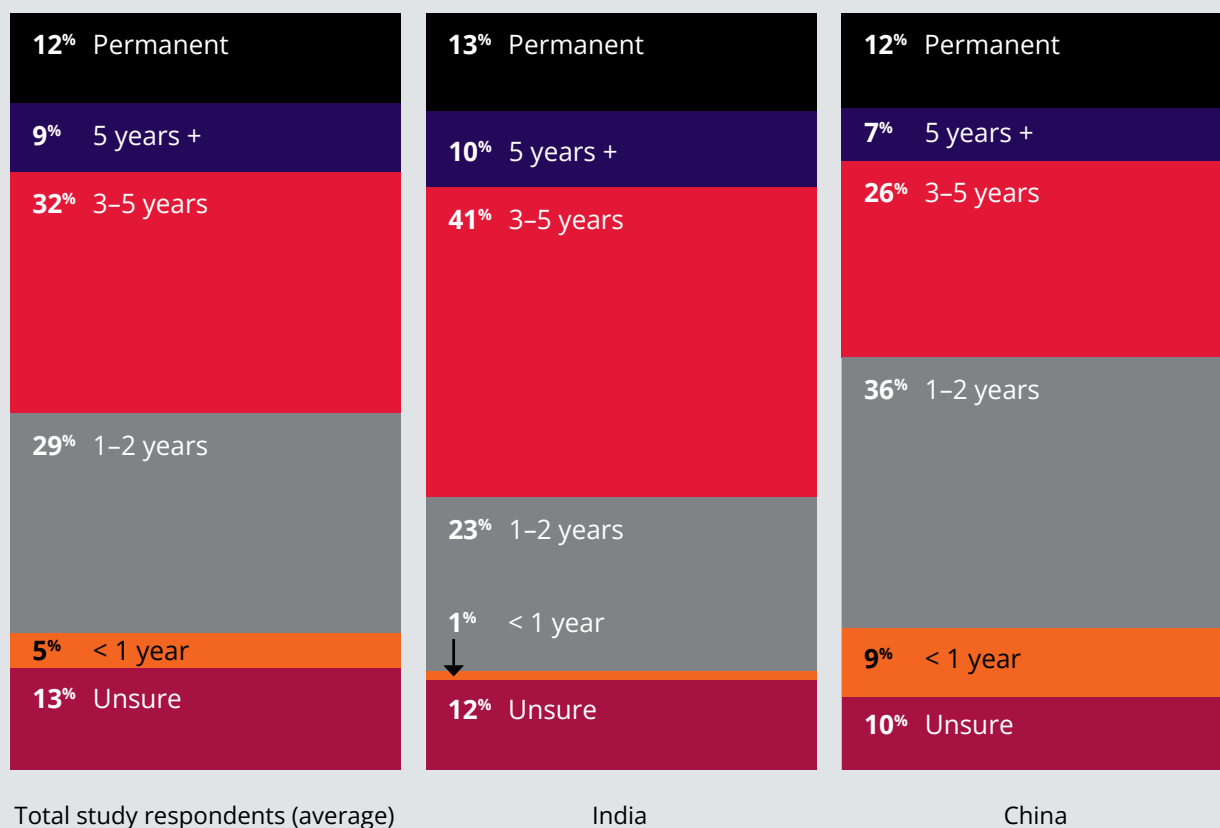
Who or what helped you decide to book an IELTS test?
(Top five responses shown. Respondents could select up to three options.)



n=8,395; multiple response

Test takers from India taking IELTS for study reasons intend to stay longer in their destination than test takers from China

How long do you intend to stay in your destination country?

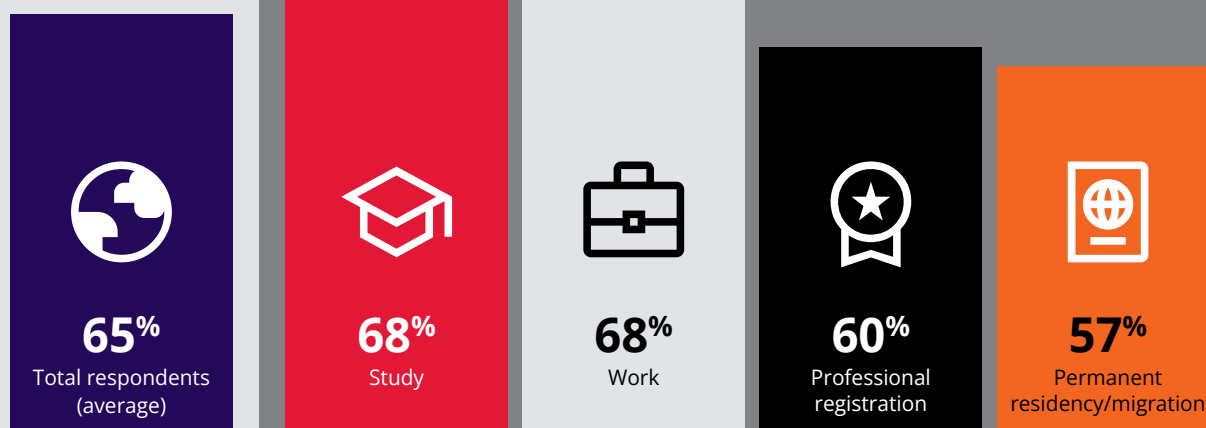


n=8,395; single response

IELTS preparation meaningfully supports skill development

To what extent do you feel that preparing for IELTS helps you develop the skills you need for your study, work, or migration goals?

Highly helpful
(7-10)



n=6,347; scale 0-10; 0 = not at all helpful, 10 = extremely helpful; The percentages shown are for high (7-10) scores only; Other 59% not shown

.....

Among test takers
who took IELTS for
study and work
purposes,

68%

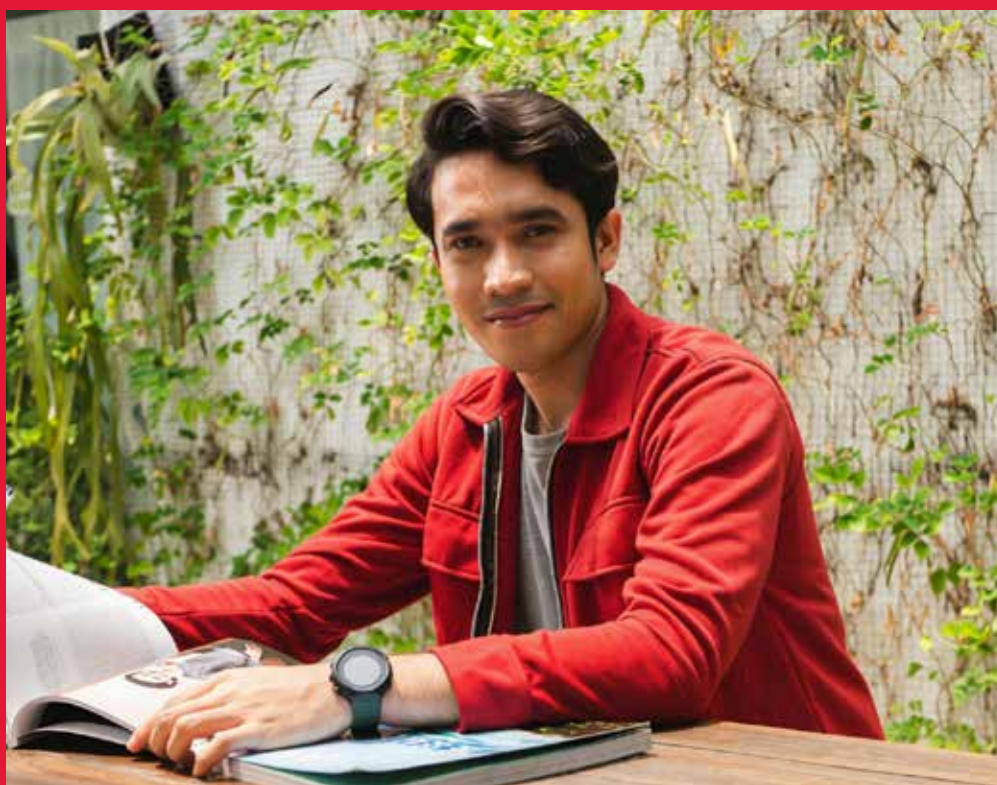
found test
preparation
very helpful in
developing the
skills needed to
pursue their goals.





.....

As pathways become more varied and decision-making more complex, organisations will need to draw on data insights.



Recommendations

1. Publish accepted tests and minimum scores clearly and consistently to help test takers compare options

Institutions should ensure information on accepted tests and minimum score requirements is clear, consistent and easy to find across institutional and partner websites. The research suggests that fragmented information spread across multiple platforms creates unnecessary friction for test takers, making it harder to compare opportunities and decreasing their likelihood of selecting an institution or organisation. Accessible information helps test takers make more confident and informed decisions.

2. Position English language proficiency as part of the test taker success journey, not just an admissions requirement

Institutions should promote true English language proficiency as an essential foundation of the wider academic and professional journey. As the research suggests, test takers are primarily motivated by confidence in achieving their study and career goals. Institutions should build on the skills a test taker has gained in test preparation, by investing in ongoing English language support as well as employability resources.

3. Track outcomes across accepted tests to better understand links between test choice, achievement and progression

Institutions and policymakers should implement systems to monitor the relationship between test choice and outcomes. As the research shows, many test takers view test preparation as contributing to communications skills, confidence and future success. Understanding how outcomes vary across accepted tests can help institutions make more evidence-based decisions about entry requirements. Part of this work should also include regular reviews of minimum score requirements to ensure they remain fit for purpose with aligned intended academic, professional and migration outcomes.

4. Recognise the diversity of test taker journeys

Policies, communications and support services should reflect the diversity of test taker experiences, drawing on local context and forward-looking data to better support people navigating study, work and migration pathways. As the research shows, there is no single test taker journey. Recognising these differences is essential to creating pathways that people can navigate with confidence.

5. Listening to test takers must remain part of the conversation

Ongoing engagement with test takers should help shape decisions across the sector. As international education, migration and workforce mobility continue to evolve, listening to test takers will remain essential to understanding emerging needs, expectations and challenges. Through IELTS Voices, IELTS will continue this research annually, contributing evidence and insights to these conversations.

Conclusion

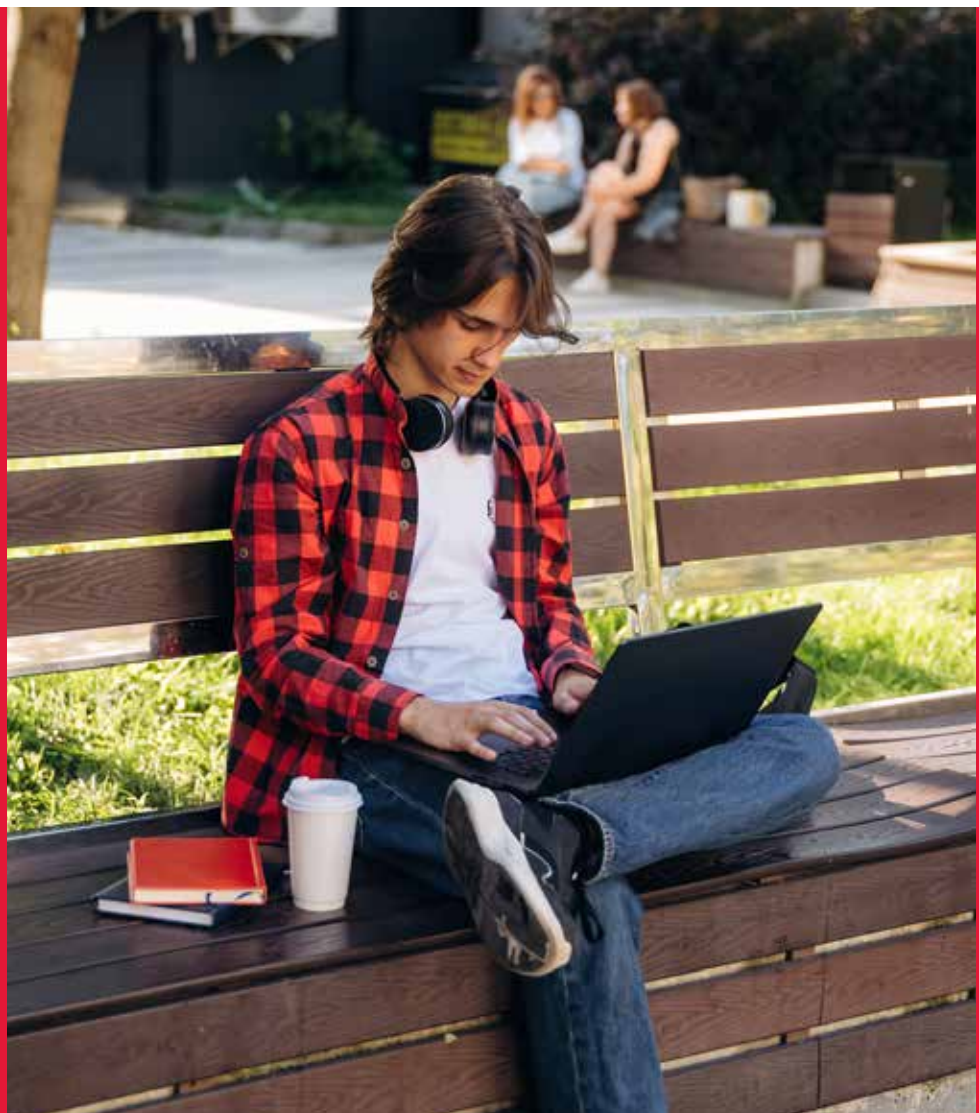
IELTS Voices reveals a global population that is ambitious, mobile and focused on long-term goals.

English language testing plays a broader role than simply meeting an entry requirement. It shapes how people assess opportunities, manage uncertainty and keep future options open. Recognition, confidence and preparation emerged as powerful drivers of decision-making across study, work and migration pathways.

The findings show that while test takers share many common aspirations, there is no single test taker journey. Priorities, challenges and outcomes vary across markets and goals, reinforcing the need for clear, transparent and consistent information that helps people pursue international opportunities with confidence.

Better pathways start with clearer understanding

Through IELTS Voices, IELTS will continue to share evidence and insights that help the sector understand, support and respond to the needs of English language test takers around the world.



Resources and further support

Through IELTS Voices and our wider research and stakeholder engagement activities, IELTS works with test takers, education institutions, governments, employers and professional bodies to better understand test taker needs and improve the experience of navigating international education, employment and migration pathways.

The resources and insights outlined below are designed to help organisations make more informed decisions and better support test takers. To discuss any of these areas or explore how IELTS can support your organisation, please contact the IELTS partners using the details provided at the end of this report.

Improving the clarity of entry requirements

- Benchmarking evidence to support reviews of English language requirements, helping institutions understand how test takers interpret and compare entry criteria and score requirements.
- Recognition and pathway insights to inform conversations around accepted qualifications, recognition practices and the role of recognition in test taker decision-making and confidence.
- Research into how test takers search for, interpret and compare information, helping organisations improve the clarity, consistency and discoverability of requirements across websites, admissions channels and guidance materials.

Understanding applicant behaviour and decision-making

- Research and market insights into test taker motivations, decision-making, barriers and outcomes across different markets and regions.
- Evidence to support discussions around accessibility, digital equity and the varying needs of different test taker groups.
- Annual research tracking emerging trends in test taker expectations, behaviours and priorities, helping stakeholders respond to changes across international education and mobility.

Supporting student success and outcomes

- Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) initiatives that help institutions build understanding of English language assessment, score use, validity, and the relationship between language proficiency and student success¹⁰.
- Research on academic readiness and positive washback, exploring how language assessment and preparation can contribute to communication skills, confidence and preparedness for study, work and migration.

¹⁰ IELTS – News: Positive test impact for universities

References

- 1 **Australian Government – Study Australia** Student visa application charge increase
<https://www.studyaustralia.gov.au/en/tools-and-resources/news/student-visa-application-charge-increase>
- 2 **GOV.UK – UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI)** Student sponsor guidance: Student sponsor compliance
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/student-sponsor-guidance/student-sponsor-compliance-accessible>
- 3 **GOV.UK – UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI)** English Language Requirement
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-language-requirement-levels-for-immigration-applications/english-language-requirement-levels-for-immigration-applications>
- 4 **Government of Canada** 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan
<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/10/20252027-immigration-levels-plan.html>
- 5 **US Department of State** Announcement of Expanded Screening and Vetting for Visa Applicants
<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/06/announcement-of-expanded-screening-and-vetting-for-visa-applicants/>
- 6 **New Zealand Immigration** Changes to the Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa announced
<https://www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/news-centre/changes-to-the-skilled-migrant-category-resident-visa-announced/>
- 7 **IELTS – News and Insights** How preparing for an English test can help students build academic habits that last
<https://ielts.org/news-and-insights/how-preparing-for-an-english-test-can-help-students-build-academic-habits-that-last>
- 8 **IELTS – News and Insights** How the right language test builds lasting study habits for university
<https://ielts.org/news-and-insights/how-the-right-language-test-builds-lasting-study-habits-for-university>
- 9 **EAPFoundation.com** What is EAP?
<https://www.eapfoundation.com/about/whatisiap/>
- 10 **IELTS – News and Insights** The benefits of positive test impact for universities
<https://ielts.org/news-and-insights/the-benefits-of-positive-test-impact-for-universities>





IELTS

IELTS Voices is a joint research venture by the IELTS Partners: the British Council, IDP IELTS, and Cambridge University Press & Assessment. Research was undertaken by IDP Education's IQ Data and Intelligence team.

Read the full IELTS Voices report on **Insights into the motivations, experiences and outcomes of English language test takers:**
[IELTS.org/IELTSVoices](https://ielts.org/IELTSVoices)

British Council

1 Redman Place
Stratford
London
E20 1JQ
ielts.organisations@britishcouncil.org

IDP Education Ltd

Two Melbourne Quarter
Level 10, 697 Collins Street
Docklands
Victoria
Australia 3008
ielts@idp.com

**Cambridge University
Press & Assessment**

Shaftesbury Road
Cambridge, CB2 8EA
United Kingdom
[cambridgeenglish.org/
helpdesk](https://cambridgeenglish.org/helpdesk)

IELTS is jointly owned by the British Council; IDP IELTS; and Cambridge University Press & Assessment

