

# Admissions simplified: leveraging IELTS scores for a comprehensive evaluation

# Streamlining admissions reviews

Like many in admissions, you may be grappling with a high volume of international applications, facing the dual pressures of thoroughness and speed. This creates a challenge that risks simplifying a potential student to merely the numbers presented in an application. In the pursuit of efficiency, there is danger in prioritizing quantitative metrics over qualitative insights (Lam et al., 2021) and potentially missing crucial nuances about international candidates. How, then, can you ensure your future students are academically prepared for success? By developing a more nuanced understanding of IELTS scores you can enrich your review process and strengthen your confidence in making informed decisions.

***"We want qualified applicants who can communicate effectively. The IELTS examination is a strong, well-constructed test that caters to this demand." Graduate Program Administrator, Brigham Young University, USA (IELTS, 2023)***

## IELTS scores: behind the numbers

*"Two main approaches to IELTS score use have been identified... either used in 'checklist' fashion or... in conjunction with other criteria in a more complex decision-making process." (Lam et al., 2021)*

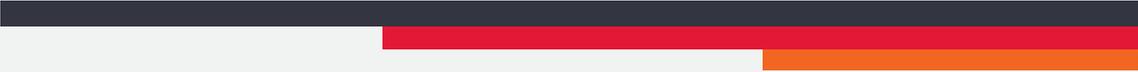
When reviewing English proficiency score numbers there are three key areas of knowledge that will improve your insight into an applicant: know the test, know the score, and know how your programs use English (Lam et al., 2021). These insights will help you gain a more holistic awareness of your applicant, and help you make the best decision about enrollment to support the success of your programs.

# Know the test

*"It is, thus, important that all test users develop a degree of understanding of the relationships between test purpose, format and the meaning of test scores in order to set and apply realistic and fair standards." (BALEAP, 2020)*

IELTS assesses academic English language proficiency through tasks that reflect real-world expectations of language use in academic instruction. This offers you valuable insights into a prospective student's current language abilities, helping you gauge if an applicant is prepared to transition to life as a full-time international student. One of the most important features of IELTS is how the assessment engages expert human examiners to assess the breadth of proficiency including the ability to adapt the use of language knowledge according to given situations. Trained expert examiners provide valuable insight into proficiency by delivering and evaluating a live face-to-face interview and providing evaluation on writing.

The recent IELTS professional series report, *'How admissions professionals can ensure applicants are university ready,'* (IELTS USA, 2023) explores the test's development and provides a comprehensive overview of how IELTS engages and assesses language skills, enhancing your understanding of how IELTS measures a student's readiness for English medium academic environments.



# Know the score

*"Admissions officers and receiving organizations should understand what IELTS does and does not assess and what IELTS scores mean in terms of actual performance." (Lam et al., 2021)*

IELTS scores offer an insightful perspective into a candidate's English proficiency, uniquely informed by the test's specific design. IELTS closely aligns task design with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), offering a more comprehensive understanding of language abilities, and emphasizing pragmatic use of language, probing proficiency beyond grammatical awareness or vocabulary knowledge.

**Institutional and concordance tables, while comparing scores across tests, struggle to accurately reflect distinctions in individual assessments and their scores, leading to potential inaccuracies.**

IELTS's extensive research provides the most accurate information related to setting and interpreting scores, built on decades of evidence. Our research provides deep insight into best practices in language proficiency evaluation, and an evidence-based approach to setting cut scores (Lim et al., 2012; Saville et al., 2021). To avoid misinterpretations, consult official IELTS information or representatives for accurate insights.

IELTS's unique design evaluates practical language skills, focusing on how effectively a student communicates and understands English in an academic setting. Alongside the overall band score, IELTS provides sub-scores in Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking, each reflecting specific areas of language proficiency. The clarity of these band scores, both overall and in individual skills, provides a distinct snapshot of a student's language capabilities, easy to use and interpret.

**Band 9 - Expert User:** exceptional command of English, marked by fluency, accuracy, and comprehensive understanding.

**Band 8 - Very Good User:** highly competent use of English with only minor lapses in accuracy.

**Band 7 - Good User:** generally effective command of English despite some inaccuracies and misunderstandings.

**Band 6 - Competent User:** adequate English skills, suitable for familiar contexts.

**Band 5 - Modest User:** limited command of English, coping with basic communication in own field.

For a more practical understanding, consider a hypothetical student — Sunee — who scores an overall 7.0 on the IELTS, with varying scores across IELTS Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. Sunee's score of 6.5 in IELTS Writing indicates Sunee can write a clear, detailed productive text. While strong, Sunee may need some support to develop and structure longer essays. With this understanding, admissions professionals can contextualize this with other aspects of Sunee's application, understanding how other strengths can be used to balance the improvements that will need to be developed in writing.

Learn  
more  
about the  
**IELTS**  
and the  
**CEFR**

This can “allow” admissions officers to be proactive when making offers, highlighting resources available to support writing development, and noting the importance of writing relevant to the learning goals of the candidate. This nuanced interpretation helps in making informed admission decisions, especially in marginal cases.

Familiarity with how language is used in your programs allows for a more tailored assessment of each applicant, ensuring that you admit students who are not just academically qualified but also linguistically prepared for the challenges ahead.

Learn more about interpreting sub-scores with the **IELTS Flash Guide for Admissions Professionals**

## Setting the Score

### Five top tips

**Review** IELTS scoring information before the enrollment season begins to accelerate applicant review.

**Survey** programs and departments to understand English language needs by disciplines.

**Reflect** on current minimum scores and review data to understand their efficacy.

**Host** a score-setting workshop to build knowledge of how language proficiency impacts learning outcomes.

**Engage** with IELTS to learn more about how IELTS evaluates and reports proficiency.

## Know your programs

*“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.” (Lam et al., 2021)*

How were the minimum English language proficiency scores set for your admissions programs? If you are unsure, you are in good company. Recent research has shown that many institutions are not clear on how or when their scores requirements were established (BALEAP, 2020; Lam et al., 2021).

Ideally, organizing an ESL proficiency score-setting workshop with members from various programs that enroll international students is recommended whenever reviewing your English language proficiency scores.

English language proficiency tests have been newly introduced and/or substantially modified in recent years. Institutions that have not recently reviewed current ESL proficiency test standards and constructs should consider conducting a score-setting workshop. This workshop should include a review of the assessments your institution accepts in relation to the language demands of your institution’s coursework. Given the diversity in assessment design and scoring methods, a thorough evaluation will clarify which scores from each exam best align with the linguistic preparedness needed for your programs. This approach should be applied not only for IELTS but for all language proficiency tests considered.

If current priorities make a comprehensive score-setting review impractical, examining the specific language requirements of your programs can still guide your evaluation of IELTS scores during application review. The chart below provides a reference for interpreting IELTS scores in relation to the linguistic requirements of your courses.

## Interpreting IELTS scores for course language demands

7.5 - 9	7	6.5	6	5
Linguistically demanding academic courses				
Acceptable	Probably acceptable	Study needed	Study needed	Study needed
Linguistically less demanding academic courses				
Acceptable	Acceptable	Probably acceptable	Study needed	Study needed

Understanding the linguistic requirements of your program is best informed by those who are responsible for the program, including deans, chairs, and faculty of specific programs. If you are unsure about how your IELTS scores align with the unique requirements of different programs, a score-setting workshop can be an effective solution to recalibrate your admissions criteria. As education has undergone significant reshaping in recent years, now is an ideal time for such a review. IELTS is ready to provide support and assistance in organizing a score-setting workshop, to ensure that there is comprehensive alignment between admissions requirements and the key linguistic needs of your institution.

# Final thoughts

By understanding the powerful data provided in the form of an IELTS score, you unlock confidence in your admission decisions, which in turn drives speed and efficiency in your enrollment process. While becoming an expert in language assessment is not feasible for every admission professional, building on a solid foundation of knowledge about the test, the score, and your applicants can vastly improve your evaluation of international applications.

When you truly know the score, you gain powerful insight into your future enrollees' potential to succeed, thrive, and contribute positively to your institution.

## How IELTS can support success at your institution



Dedicated territory managers with admissions background to help answer your questions



Score-setting workshops designed with your institution in mind



Up-to-date resources on score-setting and score interpretation



Self-guided online resources for IELTS score-setting

[\*available here\*](#)



Informative test research and test statistics to support your decision-making

Engage with us at [stakeholders@ieltsusa.org](mailto:stakeholders@ieltsusa.org)

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IELTS tests are based on decades of rigorous academic research and more than 12,000 organizations worldwide trust IELTS, including 3,400 US institutions.

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IELTS USA is a 501(c)(3) dedicated to supporting US institutions in the recognition and use of IELTS

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