English and international students: What the IELTS can and cannot tell us

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Academic pathways

English language requirements

English language and academic requirements

General English
IELTS preparation
IELTS
Secondary school
EAP
Foundation studies
Academic pathway

Tertiary study

ESOL support
Academic support
What IELTS seeks to measure

- comprehension of conversations and monologues
- comprehension of written texts
- use of language …
  - in a written description of graph, table, chart or diagram
  - in a written response to a point of view, argument or problem
  - to talk about personal information and a topic with 1 min preparation time
  - in a discussion between examiner and candidate on more abstract issues thematically linked to the prior talk topic
IELTS assessment criteria

- writing: task achievement/response, coherence & cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range & accuracy
- speaking: fluency & coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range & accuracy, pronunciation
- language features:
  - vocabulary: range & appropriacy of word choice, use of circumlocution
  - grammar: extent and effect on communication of errors
  - pronunciation: amount of strain caused to listener, amount of speech which is unintelligible & noticeability of L1 influence
- reading & listening: poor spelling and grammar are penalised
- writing: underlength scripts are penalised

IELTS: what it tells us

- IELTS is designed to indicate the likely preparedness of a student for the language demands of academic study, and studies suggest it performs strongly in this regard
- IELTS 6.5 would be linguistically more dependent than IELTS 7.0
IELTS: what is doesn’t tell us

• IELTS is **not** designed to predict the subsequent academic performance of students, and studies confirm its **poor** level of predictability in this respect

• IELTS 6.5 versus IELTS 7.0: no significant differences in academic outcomes

Why IELTS is not a strong predictor of subsequent academic performance

An IELTS scores does not indicate a test-taker's:

• knowledge of a subject area
• ability to intellectually engage with **and** utilize lectures and reading texts
• familiarity with academic conventions
• familiarity with a localised context
• motivation to study
• ability to study independently
Furthermore …

An IELTS score does not indicate …

• the effectiveness of orientation programs in familiarising students with academic expectations
• the degree of academic or language support provided to students at university
• the degree if any of modifications made to course content and/or assessment tasks to take account of international students
• the degree of variance in perceptions of academic staff towards non-native-speaker use of language in assessment tasks

A role for IELTS

• It serves a useful gate-keeping role
• Institutions need to determine the language threshold for specific programs of study
• Where certification is required, as is the case in Education, entry tests or measures more sensitive than IELTS may be required to ensure admitted students have the language proficiency to succeed in their chosen profession
If programs wish to improve academic outcomes for students …

raising the language bar will only have a positive effect if the benchmark is set too low

> comparisons of students at different IELTS scores will indicate this; looking for a point at which academic grades drop markedly

Conclusions

• Language proficiency is an important piece in the puzzle, but does not tell us the full story

• In addition to the setting of minimum language entry requirements, programs need to ensure that enrolled students have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with their subject matter

• This will inevitably require a commitment on the part of the university to providing “value-added” support measures structured into programs of study