

# Supporting Higher Education Institutions with changes in the admissions landscape

Languages Canada 2025

# Panel Discussion

Moderator:

**Dr. Sabiha Khuram,**

Account manager, IELTS, Eastern Canada

Panelists:

- **Stephen Carey,** Head of Relationship management, IELTS
- **Lindsay Brooks,** Academic Director, English Language Program, University of Toronto
- **Glenda Fish,** Operations and Academic Manager – ESL, Trent University

# Research context: taking stock



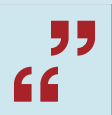
Since 2020, a broader range of English language tests have been used for university admissions



However, it is time to take stock: **are tests currently used in a high-stakes context fit for purpose?**



Concerns about students' English language proficiency levels (Wood, 2023) and lack of institutional support are often cited (Russell et al. 2022)



There may remain an underrepresentation of the language and skills needed for academic study in test constructs (Bruce & Hamp-Lyons, 2015); this has been reduced further in recent years (Wagner, 2020, Clark, 2022)

## Duty of Care

HEIs Admissions Standards

Range of Tests Accepted

International Students  
Ability to Succeed

HEIs have a ***duty of care***, both to their institution, but primarily to the international students that they are looking to attract, when selecting the English language tests that they accept.

---

# Current Project

## Background

University colleagues with differing roles and from different institutions share similar stories of navigating similar constraints.

Need for increased understanding of different tests and what scores (e.g., IELTS band scores) mean in terms of student capability to better inform:

- admissions decision making
- learning and teaching strategies
- types of support to facilitate international students.


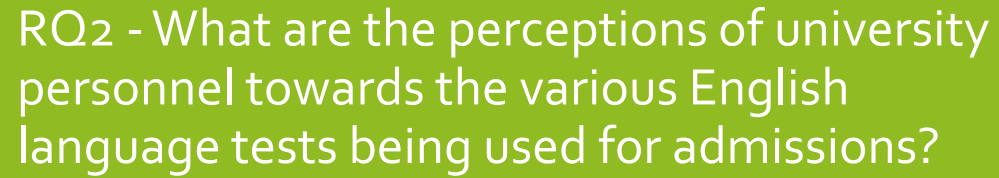
Tracking the student journey to better understand how language proficiency relates to student experience and outcomes as they transition into the university (and out into the workplace).

# Research Questions

RQ1 - What is the prevalence of different tests at UK Higher Education Institutions?



RQ2 - What are the perceptions of university personnel towards the various English language tests being used for admissions?



RQ3 - How are decisions made around which tests to include?



RQ4 – How do international students cope?



# Methodology

	Data collection	Timelines
Desk-based research	Cambridge University Press & Admissions university admissions tests overview  Research Assistant (Dundee)	(July 2023)  (September 2023 onwards)
Stakeholder surveys	Piloted and administered throughout extensive higher education networks (n=277)  Canada Survey launched	(pilot: May 2023)  (main study: August - December 2023)  (June 2024- )
Interviews	Piloted and conducted online (n=7). 30-40 mins each, recorded  Main study interviews	(pilot interviews: May - June 2023)  (Jan 2024 – June 2024)
Focus groups	Student focus groups	March-May 2024



---

# Results: UK survey and interviews

## Observed Trends

---

**IELTS** seems to emerge as most preferred English language test

---

Most widely accepted versions: IELTS Academic and UKVI (computer-based)

---

Most of top twenty-five universities require **minimum overall score of 6.5 or 7.0 for both UG & PG entry**, whilst others require minimum of 6.0 for UG and 6.5 for PG entry

---

Typical English language requirements are listed as **IELTS scores**. Other tests state **equivalence with IELTS**.

---

**In-person tests are preferred**. Majority of universities explicitly state they do not accept PTE Academic Online.

---

Tendency for higher-ranked universities to **explicitly outline requirements** whereas only a few lower-ranked universities do so.

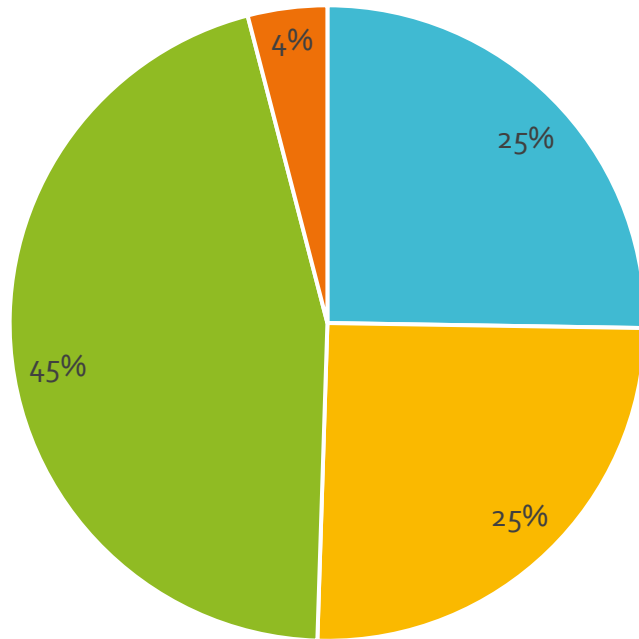
---

Five universities accept DET (one in top ten – Imperial College). Uni of Portsmouth requires credibility interview to accompany DET score.

---

Move away from remote testing - home-based tests are generally not preferred.

UK and Ireland responses  
(n=104)



■ Admissions      ■ Academic Faculty  
■ EAP              ■ Recruitment

## Survey and interview participants

Initial analysis on UK and Ireland responses (n=104). Four main groups of stakeholders:

English for Academic Practice 45%

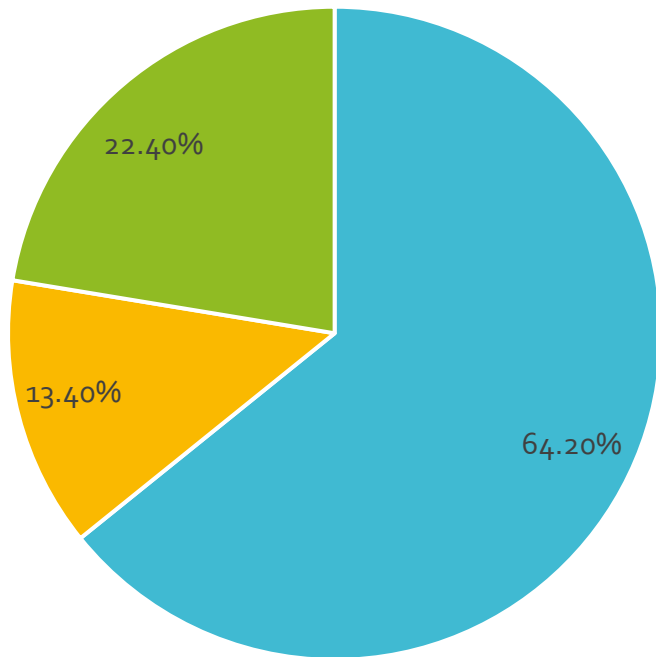
Academic faculty 25%

Admissions 25%

Recruitment 4%

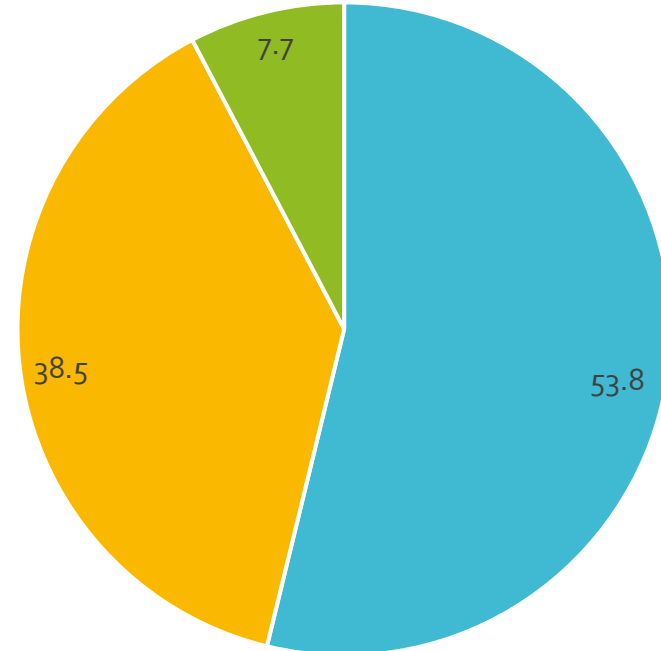
# Survey Results – Pandemic impacts remain

Did your university expand the range of English language tests accepted during the pandemic?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Not Sure

Has your university since changed this decision?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Not Sure

## Institutions' reasons for reversing decisions included:



Security concerns, including the impact of AI



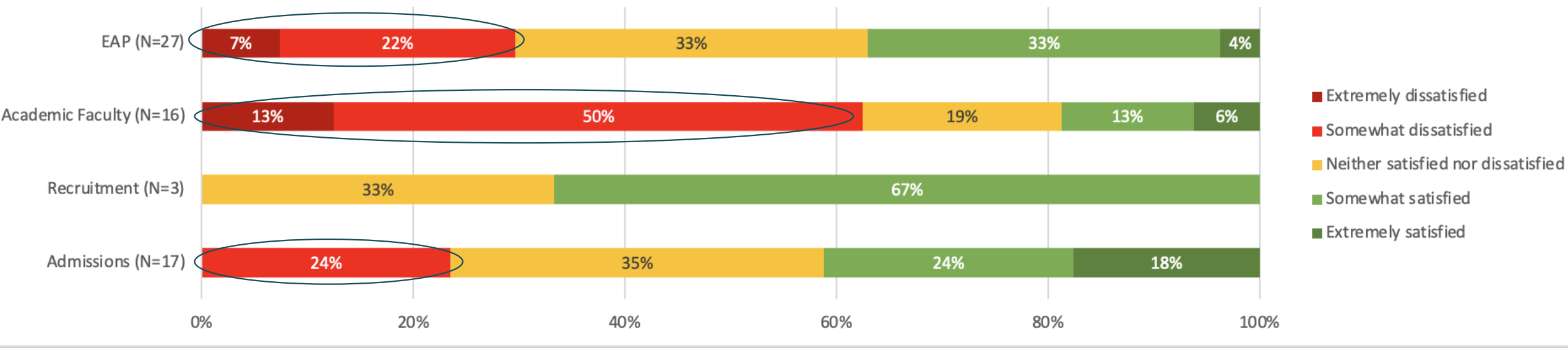
Validity of certain testing regimes, and apprehension about online testing



Perceptions that students who came in with some of the newly accepted online tests were not adequately prepared for the tertiary learning environment

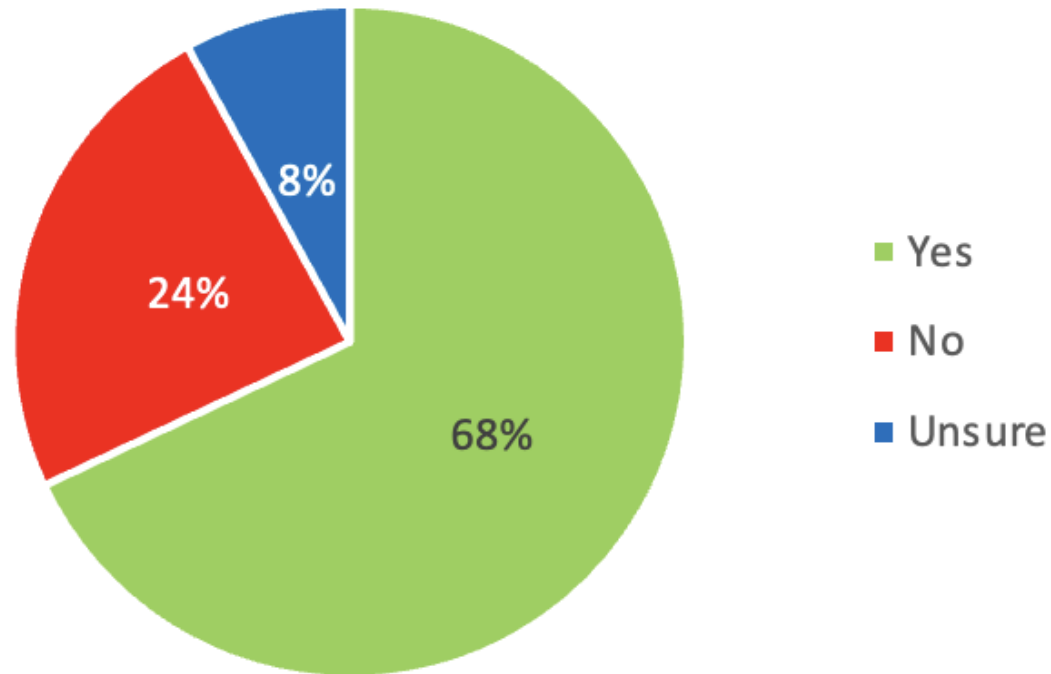
# Different levels of satisfaction with test outcomes:

How satisfied are you with the range of tests that your university currently accepts?



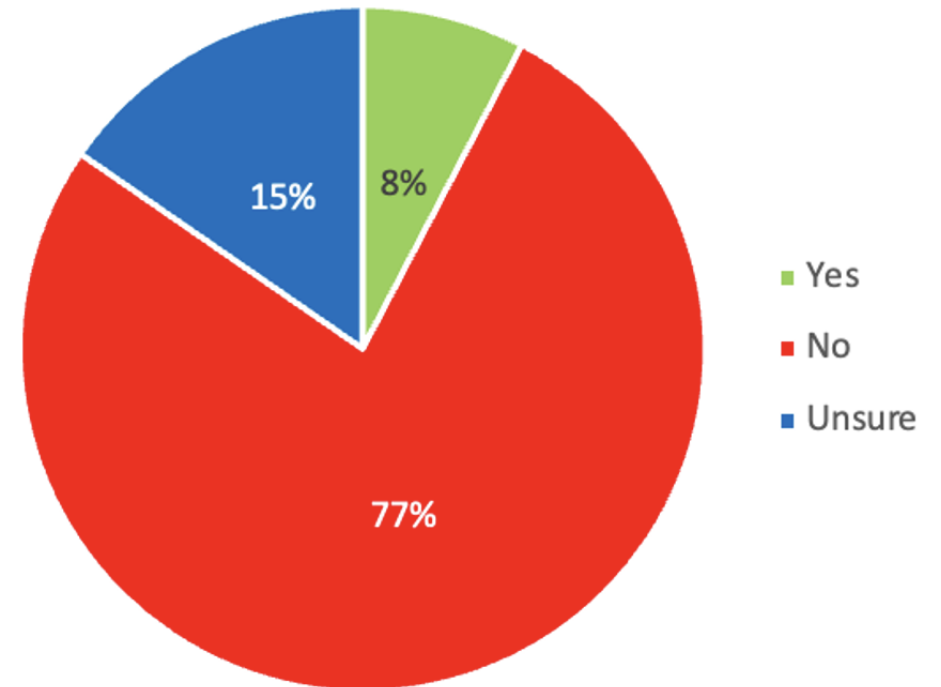
# Those inputting into university testing decisions:

Does EAP have input into choice of English tests



EAP only  
Total of 25 comments  
Positive = 16 (64%), Negative = 6 (24%), Don't Know = 2 (8%)

Are Academic Faculty involved in university process for accepting tests and setting entry standards



Admissions, Recruitment and Academic Faculty only (additional questions only asked of Academic Faculty)  
Total of 27 comments (14 from Academic Faculty)

## Language test information sources



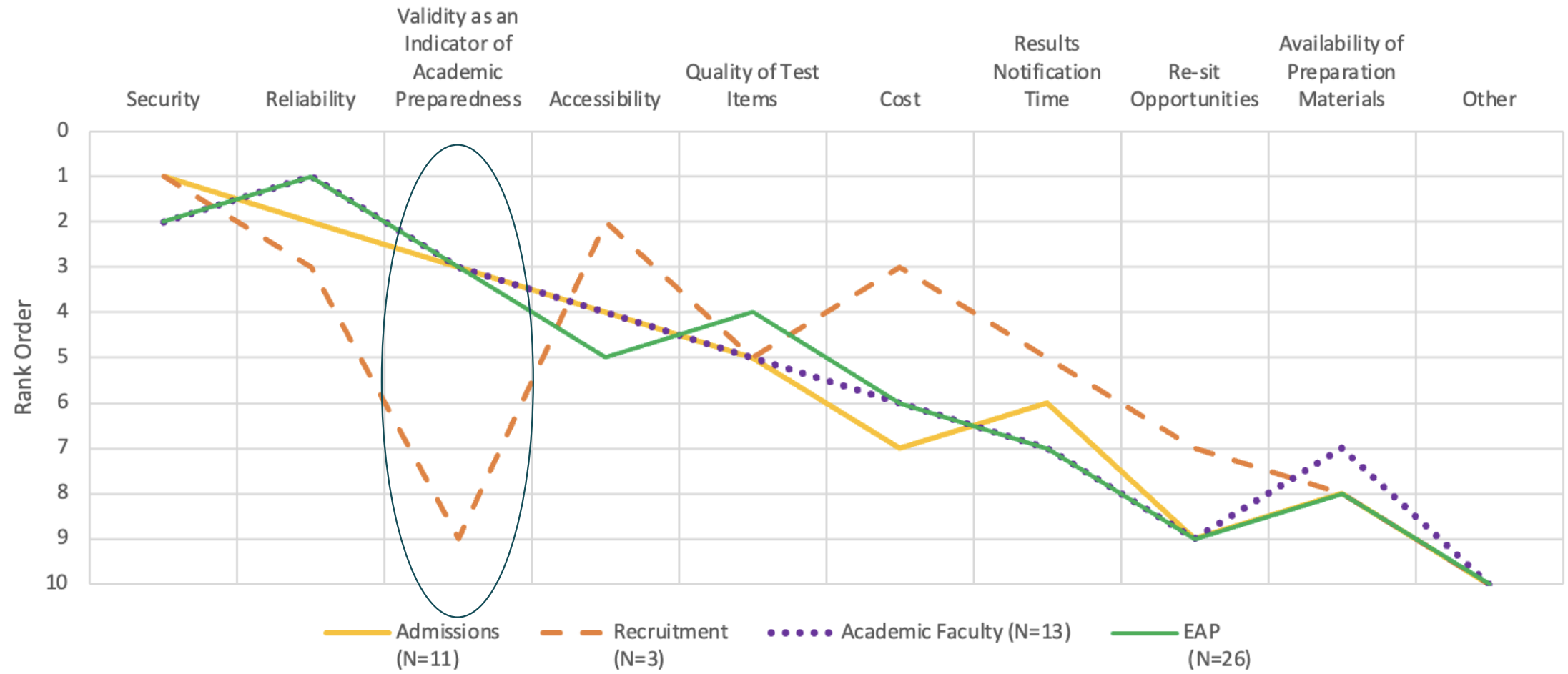
**Less than half (42%) said their university has access to sufficient reliable information to make informed decisions on which tests to accept.**

Some respondents reported that the only means of assessing test validity was internal research by the test provider, leading to quality concerns.

Newer tests provide little evidence of test comparability beyond marketing information.

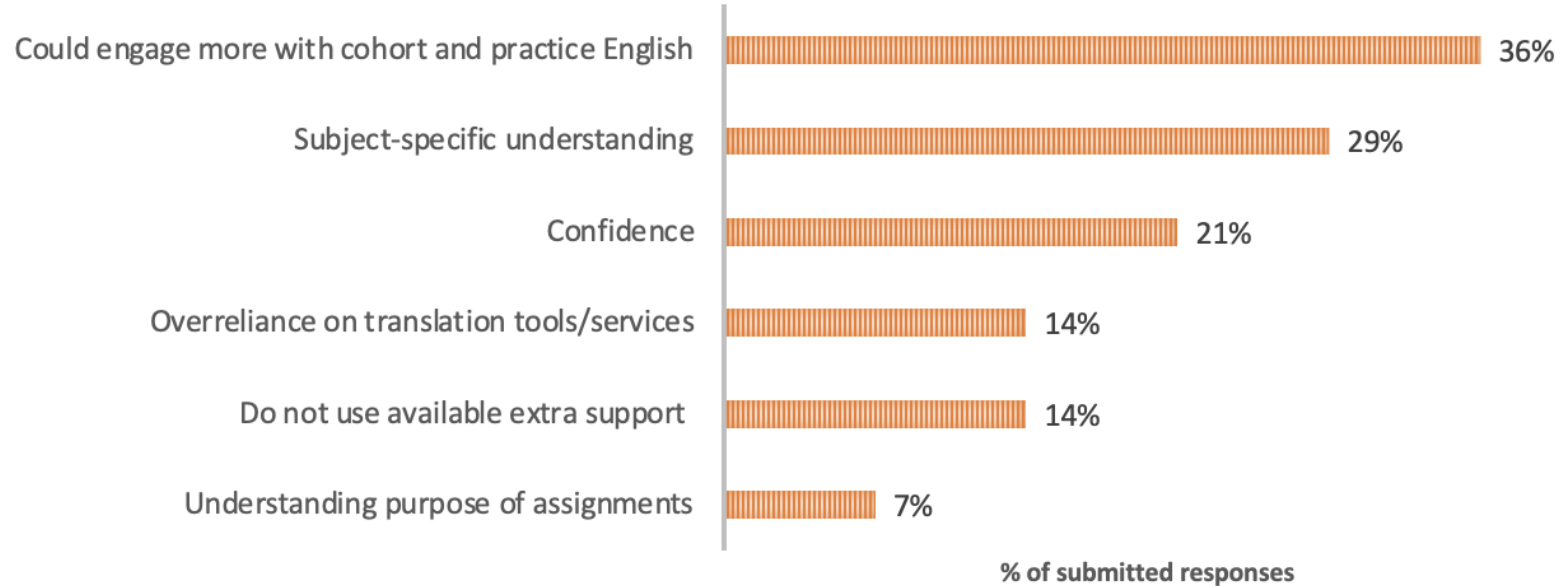


## Key considerations when deciding which English tests to accept (Ranking by Role)



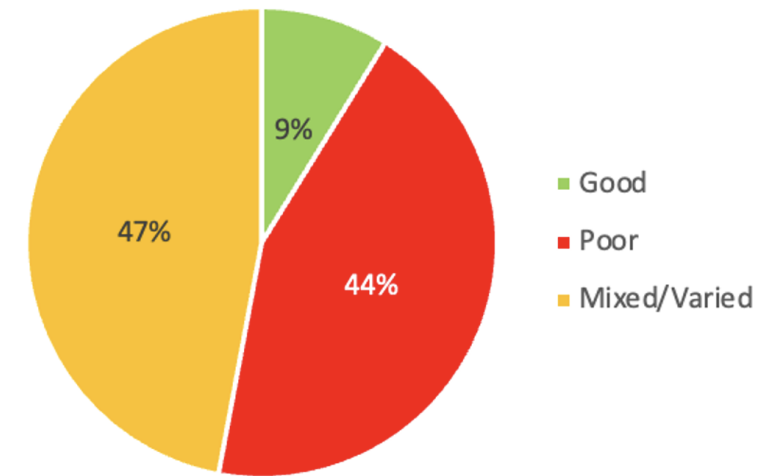
# Academic Faculty Concerns:

## MAIN CHALLENGES INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FACING IN STUDYING ENGLISH



Academic Faculty only  
Total of 14 comments

## English levels of academic students



Academic Faculty only  
Total of 39 comments  
Positive = 4 (10%), Negative = 18 (46%),  
Neutral/Depends = 16 (41%)

## Discussing survey responses in more depth

- IELTS is regarded as the international standard / the common currency
- EAP and academic staff still believe English language standards should be upheld and recognise many of the concerns about proficiency levels post-pandemic
- **There is a golden opportunity to showcase best practice in the English language standard setting, ensuring that recruitment /admissions staff and EAP/faculty work together in the selection of tests and identification of scores.**
- Processes around which tests to accept are different across institutions (academic staff may not be consulted)
- **Clear difference in perception of value of different tests**

---

# Preliminary Results: Canada

# Survey Overview

<b>Status:</b>	Ongoing
<b>Participants:</b>	37 respondents from 25+ Canadian Higher Education Institutions
<b>Roles:</b>	Admissions, Academic Faculty, Recruitment, EAP Teachers
<b>Focus:</b>	Use of English language tests for entry requirements in Canadian HEIs
<b>Context:</b>	Impact of COVID-19 on English Language Proficiency (ELP) Tests adoption

## English Language Entry Requirements in HEIs in Canada:

**Undergraduate:** IELTS score of 6.0–6.5, no component below 6

**Postgraduate:** IELTS score of 6.5–7 (varies by program)

# Widening Acceptance of English Language Tests Amid COVID-19

## Affirmative Responses (17/35): Expanded accepted tests list

- **New Additions**
  - Duolingo English Test (DET): 15 institutions
  - Other Tests: Pearson Academic, online IELTS, iBT TOEFL

## Post-Pandemic Retentions: Nine Institutions retained new tests due to:

- Duolingo's Popularity: Affordable and convenient
- Testing Flexibility: Online support for remote learners
- Predictive Validity: Positive academic outcomes
- Removal Challenges: Difficult to discontinue popular tests
- Supplemental Placement: Additional in-house tests for specific courses

## Return to Pre-Pandemic Tests: Three Institutions reverted due to:

- Higher Threshold Grades: Increased minimum admission grades
- Accuracy Concerns: Reliability doubts about the tests
- Improved Accessibility: Traditional tests like IELTS and TOEFL became more accessible

# Evaluating Satisfaction with Language Tests

## Varied Satisfaction

**General Sentiments:** Admissions staff view English language tests positively, while recruitment, faculty, and EAP staff have mixed responses, indicating areas for improvement.

**Test Utility:** Some find current tests sufficient; others advocate for expanding accepted English language tests (ELTs) to improve diversity and accessibility.

**Key Considerations:** Validity, reliability, and integrity of tests are critical factors.

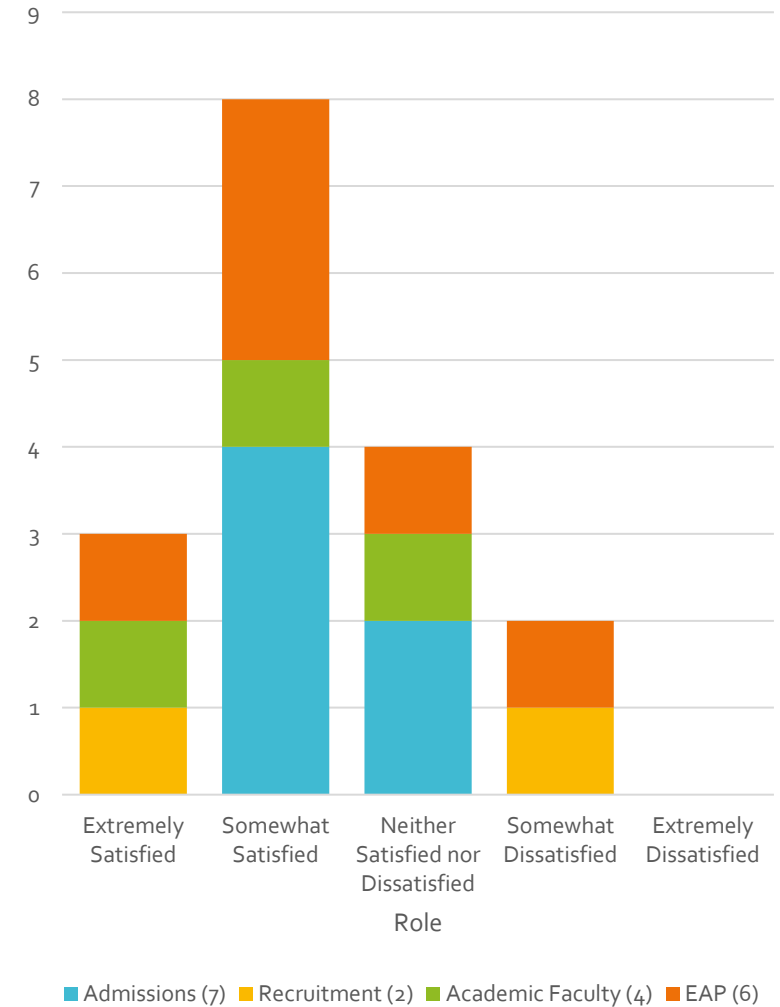
## Concerns

**Accessibility Issues:** High costs, bias against non-native speakers, and limited access to test centres are significant barriers for applicants.

**Faculty Concerns:** Concerns regarding misalignment between test outcomes and actual student proficiency levels.

**EAP Feedback:** Tests like Duolingo are viewed as inadequate for measuring academic skills, leading to calls for more rigorous testing criteria.

Staff Satisfaction with ELTs



## Specific Feedback

**IELTS and TOEFL:** Respected for aligning well with academic standards; recognised for high reliability and availability.

Criticized for being expensive, having limited access, and occasionally poor predictive validity for academic success.

**Duolingo:** Highly accessible and affordable but criticised for lacking depth in critical areas and limited capacity to gauge complex language skills required in academic settings.

**Cambridge Tests:** Valued for their comprehensive language assessment but seen less frequently in higher education admissions.

**In-House Tests and Placement Testing:** Many institutions favour in-house placement tests or entry-level courses that accurately assess productive skills (writing, speaking).

These tests align better with institutional standards and help tailor support for admitted students.

**The responses highlight the need for a balanced approach that maintains academic standards while enhancing accessibility to ELTs for diverse student populations.**



# Challenges Faced by Students and Staff

## **Student Skill Gaps:**

International students often struggle with critical thinking, problem-solving, academic integrity, and language skills, impacting their success despite high ELP scores.

## **Cultural and Academic Literacy:**

Challenges in adapting to academic norms, especially integrity and citation practices, indicate a need for cultural and academic literacy training.

## **Inconsistent Decision-Making Input:**

Varying staff involvement in ELT decisions; some faculty and EAP teachers are consulted, while others feel admissions may prioritize marketing over academic relevance.

## **Access to Resources:**

Varying access to research and concordance tables among staff; some rely on webinars and conferences, while gaps in available resources hinder effective support.

# Enhancing Availability and Quality of Information on ELTs

## **Concerns about Commercial Bias:**

Test provider information often [focuses on marketing](#), potentially [obscuring insights on performance and reliability](#).

## **Need for Research-Based Insights:**

[Thorough evaluations](#) are essential to ensure tests [accurately assess student readiness](#).

## **Role of Institutional Evaluation:**

[Structured review processes](#) enhance test selection and decision-making.

## **Transparency and Communication:**

Institutions with [robust testing protocols](#) clarify ELT efficacy; gaps in measures leave [staff feeling underinformed](#) about validity and relevance.

## **Direct Test Evaluation and Policy Influence:**

Senior staff [assess ELTs by taking the tests](#), leading to informed recommendations. Advisory committee members and test developers report [improved alignment between language requirements and student preparedness](#) through hands-on involvement

---

# Reflections and Considerations

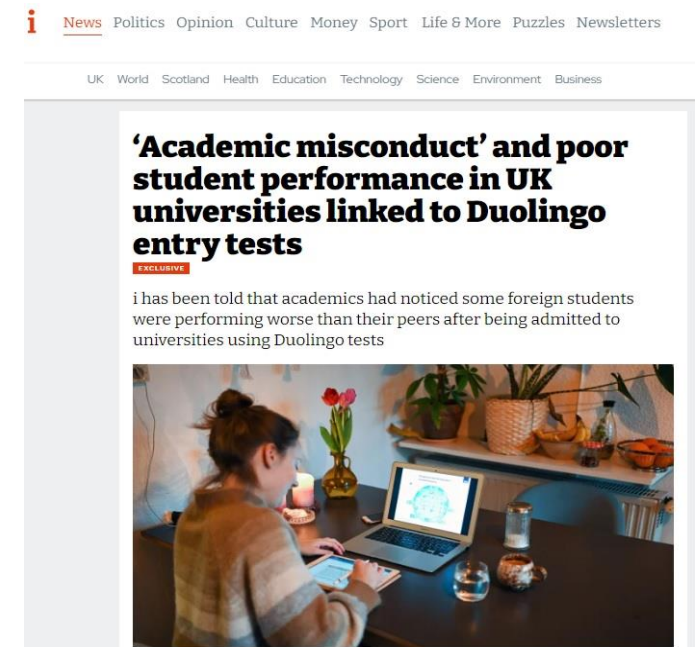
# Cost to institutions of poorer language skills

**Reputational Risk** - UK universities are reporting high first attempt fail rates of between 40 and 50% associated with insecure language proficiency

**Academic Misconduct** – Some UK universities are reporting a three-fold increase in academic misconduct cases associated with poor language skills and the inability to transition into the HE environment

*i* News, 18 March 2023

<https://inews.co.uk/news/universities-warn-over-poor-performance-after-admitting-students-using-duolingo-tests-during-pandemic-2199916>



## Cost to students of poorer language skills

- **Cost of poorer language skills in terms of student experience is considerable**
- *'The students who came with the Duolingo award were not in practice equipped to deal with HE life and study.'*
- **Students with poorer language skills are less likely to be able to access work opportunities and healthcare support.**
- In response, universities have been forced to:
  - Increase bursaries (One UK Russell Group university has had to increase bursary support by £1.5million this year alone)
  - Increase staffing budgets for additional Student Funding Advisors and Students Union Advisors
  - Increase staffing support for Mental Health Counselling and Wellbeing Support

# Future Direction



Working with the sector and sector bodies to adopt a **framework** for evaluating tests used for HE admissions



Developing **Language Assessment Literacy** for stakeholders through **workshops and support**, in collaboration with the **University of Glasgow**



Methodology being **replicated elsewhere** (e.g. here in Canada)



Enabling enhanced **duty of care** for universities to make informed decisions

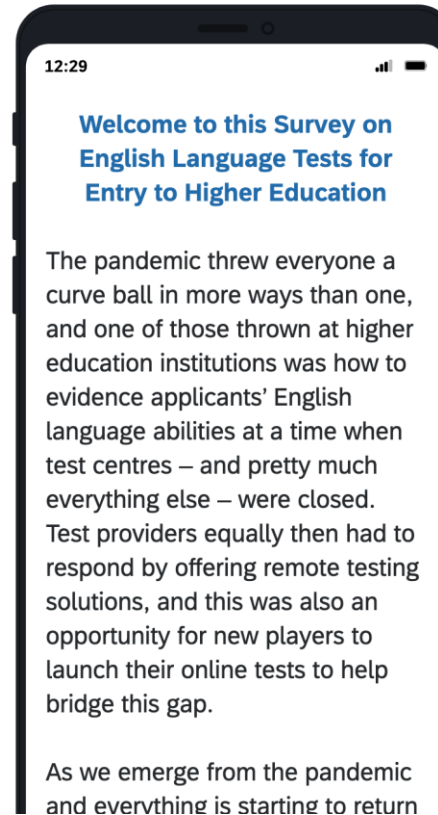
# Survey



## Welcome to this Survey on English Language Tests for Entry to Higher Education

The pandemic threw everyone a curve ball in more ways than one, and one of those thrown at higher education institutions was how to evidence applicants' English language abilities at a time when test centres – and pretty much everything else – were closed. Test providers equally then had to respond by offering remote testing solutions, and this was also an opportunity for new players to launch their online tests to help bridge this gap.

As we emerge from the pandemic and everything is starting to return to normal, well, a new normal at least, universities and test providers alike now have some time to re-evaluate and reflect on decisions that were made when there were no other options. For everyone concerned, it's both a positive opportunity in looking at how we can further advance assessment in terms of format and accessibility, but also an opportunity to reflect on what perhaps didn't go so well.



Canada

For: Recruitment | Admissions | Academics | EAP

# Thank you!





# References

- Baker, B. (2016). Language Assessment Literacy as Professional Competence: The Case of Canadian Admissions Decision Makers. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19 (1), 63–83. Retrieved from <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/CJAL/article/view/23033>
- Bruce & Hamp-Lyons (2015) Opposing tensions of local and international standards for EAP writing programmes: Who are we assessing for? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 18 (2015), pp. 64-77.
- Clark, T., & Yu, G. (2022). Test preparation pedagogy for international study: Relating teacher cognition, instructional models and academic writing skills. *Language Teaching Research*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211072381>
- Du L-J (2022) The crisis of international education students and responsive service in and after COVID-19 pandemic. *Front. Psychol.* 13:1053512. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1053512
- Koebel, C., (2023). What are the real effects of the cost-of-living crisis on students? 17 March 2023. UCL News. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/mar/what-are-real-effects-cost-living-crisis-students> accessed 15 January 2024
- Lam, D. M. K., Green, A., Murray, N. and Gayton, A. (2021) How are IELTS scores set and used for university admissions selection: A cross-institutional case study. IELTS Research Reports Online Series, No. 3. Documentation. ELTS Partners: British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia.
- NUS, (2022). Cost of living rise sees 96% of students cutting back. NUS news, June 2022. [https://www.nus.org.uk/cost\\_of\\_living\\_rise\\_sees\\_96\\_of\\_students\\_cutting\\_back](https://www.nus.org.uk/cost_of_living_rise_sees_96_of_students_cutting_back) accessed 15<sup>th</sup> January 2024.
- Russell et al. (2022). A mixed-method investigation into international university students' experience with academic language demands.
- Russell Group Students Unions, (2023). Student Cost of Living Report. Russell Group Students' Union, Gordon Street, London. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63f4ed73056f42572785c28e/t/640b4a3d20fc6122160c275e/1678461513650/Cost+of+Living+Report+-+March+2023.pdf> accessed 15 January 2024
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P. & Chui, W.H. International students: a vulnerable student population. *High Educ* 60, 33–46 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z>
- Tancredi, S., Burton-Jeangros, C., Ruegg, R., Righi, E., Kagstrom, A., Vallee, A. Q., et al. (2022). Financial loss and depressive symptoms in university students during the first wave of the covid-19 pandemic: Comparison between 23 countries. *Int. J. Public Health*. 67:1604468. doi: 10.3389/ijph.2022.1604468
- Taylor, L. (2013). Communicating the theory, practice and principles of language testing to test stakeholders: Some reflections. *Language Testing*, 30(3), 403-412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532213480338>
- Udah, H., & Francis, A. (2022). Vulnerability and Well-Being: International Student's Experience in North Queensland, Australia. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*. Vol 14, Issue 5 (2022), pp. 171-196. DOI: 10.32674/jcihe.v14i5.3942 | <https://ojs.ojedi.org/jcihe>
- Wagner, E. (2020). Duolingo English test, revised version July 2019. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 17(3), 300-315.
- Wood, P. (2023, March 20). 'Academic misconduct' and poor student performance in UK universities linked to Duolingo entry tests. The i. <https://inews.co.uk/news/universities-warn-over-poor-performance-after-admitting-students-using-duolingo-tests-during-pandemic-2199916>