



Mind the Gap

Aligning English Proficiency
Expectations Across Pathways,
Institutions, and Professional
Futures



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**Let's start with a quick
survey**



Agenda

01 The IELTS 9-Band scale

02 Guide for ELP requirements

03 Setting ELP Requirements

04 Adjusting ELP Requirements

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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

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.

Quick-start guidance for educational institutions

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

Points to consider when setting scores

- ❖ The demands placed on language ability in your organization
- ❖ 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 post secondary education to employment be too great?



Considerations when adjusting ELP requirements



- ❖ Scores Reflect Quality
 - Lowering IELTS scores by even 0.5 can have negative impacts on student outcomes and retention
- ❖ Lowering Scores may increase the volume of student applications
 - students will need additional language support once matriculated
- ❖ Varied Levels of language learning
 - Individuals learn at different rates making it difficult to plan at org level

The negative impacts of inconsistent score-setting

❖ Research found that minimum English proficiency requirements vary widely across post-secondary degrees and the professions they lead to.

Research by Dr Amanda Müller and Andrew Brenner found:

- ❖ Minimum scores set by post secondary institutions were often lower than those set by related professions
- ❖ The way different organizations compared the scores of different tests varied
- ❖ Some post-secondary institutions and professions set lower minimum scores than recommended by test providers

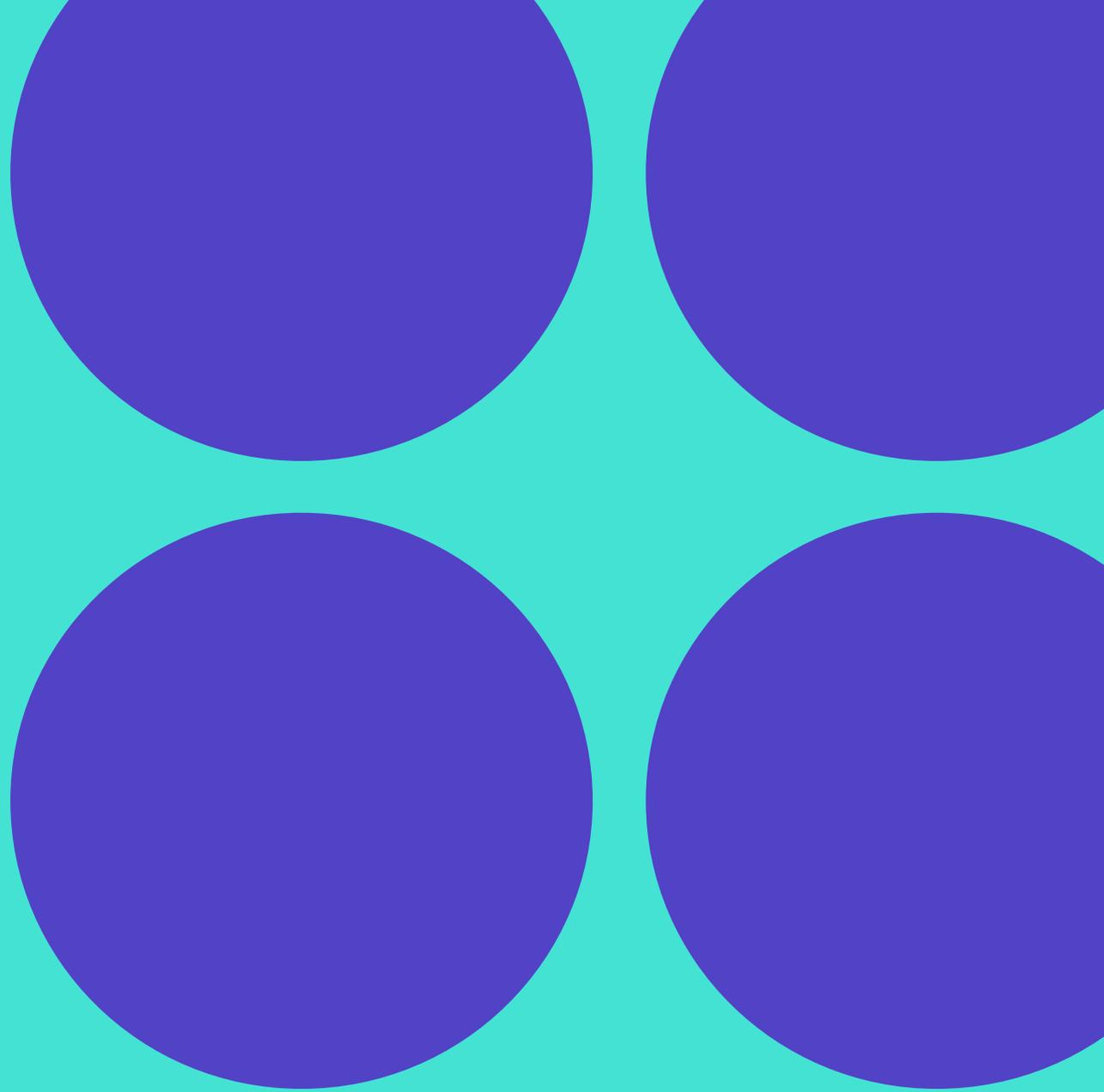
Sector	Post-Secondary Degree IELTS Requirements	Professional Registration IELTS Requirements
Education	6.6 (5.0-8.0)	7.1 (6.0-7.5)
Law	6.5 (5.5-8.0)	7.2 (7.0-7.5)
Medicine	6.7 (6.5-7.5)	7.1 (6.5-7.5)
Nursing	6.7 (6.5-7.5)	6.7 (6.5-7.5)
Psychology	6.7 (6.0-8.0)	7.1 (7.0-8.0)
Social Work	6.6 (5.5-7.5)	7.0 (7.0)
All Professions	6.6 (5.5-8.0)	7.0 (6.0-8.0)

Implications of different standards for professional registration and degree entry

- ❖ Research has shown that for a student to improve by a 0.5 band score, they would need to study English for up to 6 months full-time because gains are slower at higher levels than lower levels
- ❖ Research has also shown that international students do not necessarily increase their IELTS score by more than a 0.5 band over an entire degree, even when support services are available.
- ❖ If an applicant enters university with a test score that is lower than a minimum score recommended by their target profession, they may not have the level of English they need to enter that profession when they finish university.

This reinforces the need for appropriate scores to be set.

**Further
Implications of
lower ELP
scores and
poorer
language skills**



Cost to Students

- ❖ International students are most affected by mental health impacts, and those with **poorer language skills** NUS UK survey reports that **90% of students say poor mental health is impacting their ability to study** (NUS, 2022):
- ❖ “Greater precarity and poor mental health transform the cost-of-living crisis into a cost-of-learning crisis, with 53% of students saying that their academic performance has suffered” (Koebel, 2023).
- ❖ The Russell Group Students' Unions Survey reports that **21% of students have considered deferring their studies and 18% have considered dropping out:**
 - “I was thinking about dropping the program and go back to my country, because the circumstances here are unbelievably terrible.”



Cost to Institutions

❖ Cost to institutions of students with poorer language skills is considerable

- A 2023 Russell Group study of 8,800 UK students found that almost **1/3** were living off less than £50 a month.
- Those most affected were international students, and particularly female international students who were most at risk of precarity (Koebel, 2023).
- Research shows students with poorer language skills are less likely to be able to access work opportunities and healthcare support.
- **In response, institutions have been forced to:**
 - Increase bursaries (One UK Russell Group university has had to increase bursary support by £1.5million in 2022 alone)
 - Increase staffing budgets for additional Student Funding Advisors and Students Union Advisors
 - Increase staffing support for Mental Health Counselling and Wellbeing Support

Outcomes for Institutions?

Impacts associated with poor academic attainment:

⌘ Reputational Risk

- UK universities are reporting 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 UK HE environment



Key Consideration: Duty of Care



- ❖ Not having the right level of English language proficiency can prevent students from succeeding in their courses and stop professionals from doing their jobs effectively and safely
- ❖ HEIs have a ***duty of care***, both to their institution to the international students that they are looking to attract, when **setting their ELP requirements** and planning student services.
- ❖ **Greater score literacy is therefore required by HEIs** both in setting appropriate entry requirements and in understanding what additional support international students may need in order to successfully perform throughout higher education and in the professional context.

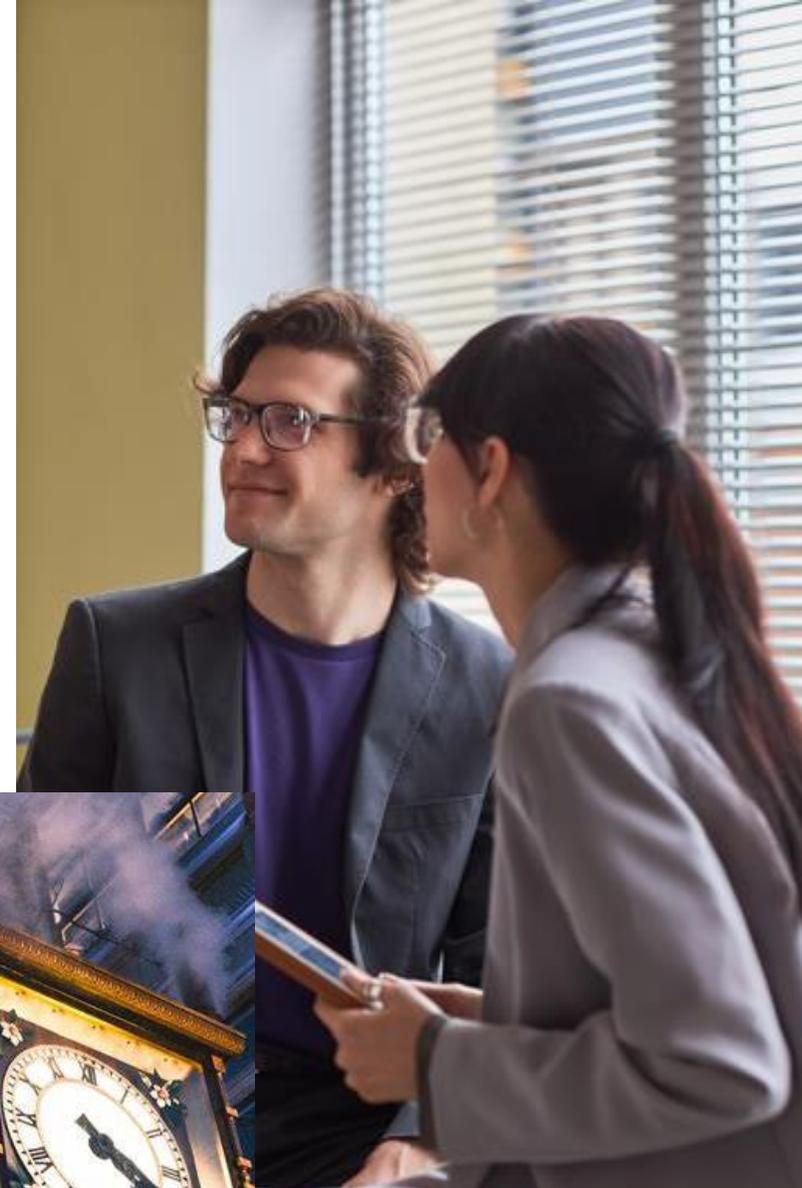


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Thank you



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References



Investigating the English language proficiency gap: when university and industry standards are misaligned



Investigating linkages between international students' English language proficiency, social-contextual outcomes, and wellbeing in US universities



Russell Group Students Unions, (2023). Student Cost of Living Report. Russell Group Students' Union, Gordon Street, London

New IELTS Research Report Available

Comparing New TOEFL 2026 with former TOEFL 2023 and IELTS

- The report focuses on construct comparison between the new TOEFL iBT, its predecessor and IELTS Academic, and on how that comparability impacts score interpretation. The authors examine test elements against a broad range of facets related to validity, such as cognitive processing, task design, scoring, alignment with CEFR, and washback to determine how the new version of TOEFL iBT compares to its predecessor. Key IELTS Academic information is included to provide a reference point for comparison.

