

RESPONSE TO
A DISCUSSION PAPER ON THE RECOGNITION OF
ALTERNATIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS
FOR STUDENT VISA PURPOSES

BY
MEMBERS OF
THE ISANA INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

General comments

While the paper is very thorough and seems to address all the pertinent issues, there are some general and also some more specific comments that members of the ISANA International Education Association, who work intimately with our international students in dealing with the consequences of decisions made on the basis of these tests, would like to make.

The need for education of providers, agents and DIAC in regards to the relevancy of each test

If alternate tests are offered it will be important to ensure that universities and RTOs are consistent in the acceptance of these tests. If they are not then there is the danger of a hierarchical acceptance of tests being implemented e.g. some institutions refusing to accept tests other than IELTS.

Integrity measures

The following integrity measures are suggested by former IELTS examiner -

- a) names of test examiners/markers not be distributed in advance of testing dates
- b) use of only non-local markers and invigilators be considered
- c) test results to be held by non-local personnel until release.

Content of Tests

1. Some members believe that the IELTS test does not really reflect what students are likely to encounter in a study context at university level. The reading passages in an IELTS test for example are very short and conventionally structured; often quite unlike that articles that have to be read at university. *This may be an area that could be addressed in any newly-devised tests.*
2. While IELTS courses might prepare students for an English speaking university environment, they do not address well the needs of students studying in specific areas such as music. For example, preparation for an IELTS test does not provide future music students with the opportunity to
 - become familiar with music content, specialised language and vocabulary
 - follow a subject long enough to gather information and draw out the central points of that information
 - discuss, synthesize and question that information
 - become familiar with the argumentations and rhetorical conventions of the discipline

- write over a period of time long enough so that both ideas and prose may be revised
- learn how to cite references specific to music
- learn how to avoid plagiarism
- devote sufficient time to practice and the language used in the practice of music

Being proficient in a language is not necessarily related to being able to manipulate a language specific academic context.

A more suitable test in this case is one such as the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR) which has a “specific purpose” component.

Options for identifying alternative tests and appropriate scores

1. The iBT test would appear to be a good alternative to IELTS. The integrated tasks where students may be asked to read a passage, listen to someone speak and then write a response are a more realistic challenge for potential tertiary students than reading a passage and answering questions, which is required in the IELTS test.
2. Tests with a “specific purpose” component such as the ISLPR discussed above should be considered.

Appropriate mechanisms for assessing the suitability and appropriateness of alternative English proficiency tests

It is suggested that a standards setting process be established similar to that used in the iBT i.e. a panel of professionals (lecturers from a cross-section of disciplines, language teaching professions, and deans etc.) which makes judgements on a series of texts/transcripts etc., discusses these standards and then sets minimally accepted standards for undergraduate and postgraduate study. This process could be used to evaluate a range of alternative tests. The benefits of the process are that, while a range of views are heard and judgements made, a consensus is almost always achieved through discussion.

Appropriate methods of establishing equivalence of scores

Again a panel could be used to ascertain what skills are tested in each test, the relationship between the test score and a global descriptor (stating what a student can do) and how these descriptors “fitted” with the descriptors in other tests. Versions of tests would also need to be tested for consistency and reliability but such a process would establish whether in fact tests were measuring the same thing e.g. whether a 6 IELTS did indicate that a student could be expected to display the same skills as a student with an iBT of 80.