

IELTS: Empowering stakeholders

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Abstract

The IELTS test is experiencing many challenges in 2006 as the test continues to grow. In the world of international language testing, test providers have a prime responsibility to respond to the needs of stakeholders as well as to take into account research in language testing and any changes in the contexts in which the test is used.

To respond to these challenges, the IELTS partners are acting in several areas. The needs of primary stakeholders – candidates, tertiary institutions, professional organisations and government departments – are driving innovation, particularly in relation to security issues, the development of new centres and the expansion of the capacity of current centres, and other practical matters including electronic features that streamline the delivery of results.

Echoing the theme of this conference, to educate and empower delegates for their roles as international education professionals, this presentation addresses the need for those working with international students to be as well informed as possible about the IELTS test. Stakeholders have more information than ever now about the rating scale to assist them to make more informed decisions about their use of IELTS band scores. The IELTS website now includes information about how the test is constructed, how IELTS scores are calculated, the rating scales used for Speaking and Writing, and the IELTS requirements of education and professional institutions worldwide. To further meet stakeholder needs, other developments include new resource material to assist organisations with standard setting.

Developments within the test itself reflect a firm commitment to staying abreast of research in language testing, which has resulted in two major revisions of the test in the last six years. There is an equally firm commitment to the professional development of the team of IELTS examiners in the setting up of the Professional Support Network. With the challenges of 2006 firmly met, IELTS will face 2007 with confidence.

Key Words

IELTS, rating scale, standard setting

Introduction

The IELTS test in 2006 continues to evolve to meet the needs of all stakeholders. A great deal has been happening in this past 12 months that affects the candidates and other stakeholders.

The challenges of growth

In 2006, IELTS finds itself in a period of growth. Candidate numbers, which had been strong at over half a million worldwide for two years, are significantly up, and such growth presents the test with a number of challenges. In Australia, candidate numbers have been affected over the last 12 months by changes to the Australian Government Skilled Migrant scheme, and specifically to applicants in category 880, Independent Overseas Students. Graduates from Australian institutions must now show Vocational proficiency level of English as part of their application, which means a minimum of band 5 on all four modules of the IELTS General Training Module (DIMA, n.d.). Centre numbers in Australia had been strong and stable for two years, but in December/January 2005/2006 candidate numbers increased by 60% on average around the country, during a time that is always the busiest testing period. Growth has continued to be very strong.

In response, various measures were implemented immediately and as ongoing developments. Capacity at all existing centres was increased, and the entire Australian network was mobilised to coordinate the absorption

of the increase. Two new centres were opened in Melbourne by mid-2006, and the opening of more new centres is well advanced. Australia-specific test dates for the General Training module were issued by the test partners as an emergency measure. The growth worldwide is continuing and increasing, with numbers in 2006 expected to be well over half a million candidates. New centres continue to open, for example in countries such as Bangladesh and Zambia. However, the growth in the General Training Modules is an Australian phenomenon; the main purpose of test users continues to be academic study (78.1% of candidates in 2005 took the Academic Modules).

What's new in 2006?

Changes have been made to better respond to candidate needs, and to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are met. It had become apparent that the 90-day ban on re-taking IELTS was causing undue hardship and distress to some candidates faced with inflexible intake dates for receiving institutions, so this ban was relaxed from 1 May 2006. Centres are taking steps to avoid block booking by candidates, which would in turn cause undue hardship to other candidates. However, it must be emphasised that it is normal for band scores to vary slightly from one test to another, and that a candidate's band score will not alter substantially unless they undertake a deliberate programme to improve their English between tests.

To assist with streamlining the test-taking experience for candidates and to increase already rigorous security measures to protect IELTS results, an electronic download facility is now available. Through this means, receiving institutions registered with IELTS and nominated by the candidate can now download IELTS results directly.

In 2005 and 2006, significantly more information has been made available to stakeholders about the test, to assist candidates, teachers, researchers and, in particular, receiving institutions. Much of this information has been made available through the updated IELTS website, www.ielts.org. The website addresses the main interests of stakeholders, including applying for the test, test data, how bands are arrived at, and comparative information about acceptable band scores by different colleges, universities and professional associations. Typical questions stakeholders ask include: What is the mean band score for the Academic Modules? How are IELTS bands awarded for Listening and Reading? How are the Writing and Speaking Modules rated? What bands are required by other universities in my region, and worldwide?

On the website, the main areas where these and other questions can be answered are, firstly, IELTS Data (updated annually), Teachers Resources (including information about each module, FAQs, Do's and Don'ts, and classroom lesson plans), and Downloads (where Application forms, the Information for Candidates brochure, the Handbook and other material can be downloaded). By clicking on Teachers and Researchers, information about the test production process and band score processing and reporting is available. Under the Global Recognition System, users can search for the IELTS entry requirements of all organisations registered with IELTS. For candidates, a complete, up-to-date list of centre contact details is available, as well as information on how to apply. The website had 7.5 million hits in 2005, representing 1.6 million individuals.

Looking at the typical questions noted above, the first was: What is the mean band score for the Academic Modules? In 2005, this was 6.05, an increase on the band score of 6.0 in 2004. The worldwide Academic mean band has been slowly rising over the last few years, perhaps an indicator that candidates are taking the test with more realistic expectations of the level of English required in their chosen study or professional path. These bands plus percentile rankings according to a range of criteria, including different language groups and reason for taking the test, are now detailed on the website.

Table 1: IELTS mean band scores 2005 (IELTS, n.d., IELTS mean bands data)

Module	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall
AC	6.15	5.98	5.69	6.11	6.05
GT	5.97	5.59	5.75	6.15	5.94

The second typical question posed earlier asked how bands are awarded for Listening and Reading. This process is now detailed on the website. The 40 question items of each module generate a raw score out of 40

that is converted to a band according to a band score conversion table, unique to each version of each paper. The following table gives average band score conversions, based on 2004 data.

Table 2: Average raw marks required to achieve mid-range bands (IELTS, n.d., band score conversions)

	Listening (average score)	Academic Reading (average score)
Band 5	16	15
Band 6	23	23
Band 7	30	30
Band 8	35	35

For the subjectively rated modules, Writing and Speaking, IELTS Examiners use detailed performance descriptors for four key criteria for both Writing and Speaking; these descriptors describe written and spoken performance at each of the nine IELTS bands. Versions of these descriptors have been available on the website since 2005, and give stakeholders a very clear idea of what applicants who present with an IELTS band score can do at each of the levels for Writing and Speaking.

Coming to the third of the questions asked earlier, for several years the IELTS test partners have published an annual compilation of IELTS band score requirements at receiving institutions worldwide. This information is now on the website, in a vastly improved version, as a searchable database. Regularly updated, the Global Recognition System can be searched by country or region, organisation, location, and band score. As more institutions recognise IELTS, from educational institutions to professional bodies, governments, and employers, they are able to add their data to the GRS.

Stakeholders regularly ask how an IELTS band score can be equated with a result on other tests. In fact, it is very difficult to do this, as tests, even those that appear to share many characteristics as international standardised tests, differ in some important ways to do with design, purpose and format. In addition, candidates' individual differences come into play, and their aptitudes and preparation for a particular kind of test may affect their results. Nonetheless, Cambridge ESOL, the IELTS test partner responsible for test production, has conducted a considerable amount of research into comparing the IELTS bands to other tests also produced by Cambridge ESOL, and to the levels in the Common European Framework (CEF). As noted on the website: 'It is important to recognise that the purpose of [reporting relationships between tests in a table] is to communicate relationships between tests and levels in broad terms within a common frame of reference; they should not be interpreted as reflecting strong claims about exact equivalence between assessment products or the scores they generate' (IELTS, n.d., CEF map).

IELTS Scores Explained

A new development in October 2006 is the release of a DVD entitled *IELTS Scores Explained*. It has been apparent for some time that receiving institutions needed help in setting appropriate band score requirements. This assistance and information has now been helpfully gathered in one tool, a DVD containing downloadable files, available at a cost of £15 from the IELTS website. The DVD covers all four modules. It can be used to see examples of IELTS test tasks in Listening and Reading, to see how raw scores convert to bands, to evaluate examples of candidates' Writing and Speaking performance from bands 3 to 9 (Writing) and 3 to 8 (Speaking), and to see what level of Writing and Speaking performance can be expected from an applicant who presents with a particular band score. Specifically, it can be used to conduct standards setting studies to fix minimum score requirements that meet the needs of an institution.

Professional Support Network

As IELTS has evolved, it is not only the candidates and other stakeholders who have gained support. From April 2006, IELTS Examiners worldwide have benefited from the setting up of the Professional Support Network. Responding to Examiner and test centre needs, the PSN is designed to provide training, standardisation and support to Examiners and standardise centre administration of Examiners, and to manage Examiners from recruitment to evaluation. Crucially, it is designed to assist in maintaining standardisation

and inter- and intra-rater reliability. The PSN standardises the role of the Examiner Trainer, and creates new positions to coordinate this role, the Examiner Support Coordinator and the PSN Manager, in recognition that standardised, reliable Examiner training, monitoring and certification is fundamental to the ongoing reliability of the IELTS test as a whole. That such steps to maintain standardisation are a key to maintaining the quality of the test is a factor understood and appreciated by stakeholders.

What does IELTS face in 2006–2007?

All indications are that the growth in candidate numbers will continue, and the test partners will continue to meet this challenge. In 2007, test results will allow for half-bands to be awarded for Writing and Speaking as they currently are for Listening and Reading; this is a long-desired feature of the test that will now be possible as a direct result of moving to analytical rather than holistic rating in the Writing and Speaking Modules.

Any existing test will accrue uses that may bear little resemblance to its original purpose. IELTS was designed primarily for candidates seeking to study at university in an English-speaking country, but increasingly it is being used as a test of general English proficiency. IELTS is currently being used as part of the application process for immigration in a number of countries, and this use may expand. The test partners are monitoring carefully the Australian Government's response to the review of the General Skilled Migration Program in 2006 (Birrell, Hawthorne and Richardson, 2006), as this may have implications for candidate numbers in Australia.

IELTS is one of a great number of ways that international students may use to enter their chosen study path. The diversity of pathways to study in Australia and other English-speaking countries is to be welcomed, and is a sign of the vitality of the international education industry, and of its ability to meet the needs of the market. However, these pathways need to be subjected to the same level of scrutiny, and the same demands for validity and reliability, as assessment vehicles, as IELTS is subjected to, to ensure that they are valid and reliable, which our international students should rightly demand. IELTS welcomes a high level of scrutiny; any high stakes international language proficiency test must be accountable to the stakeholders.

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