

Section 1:

Evaluation of English Language Qualifications

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1.1 Introduction

Section 1 of the Guide supports UK higher education institutions' decision making on the acceptance of English Language qualifications for entry into UK higher education. The section outlines recommended good practice and evidence-based decision making to ensure the acceptance of any English language qualification is underpinned by a clear and transparent rationale. It focuses on how to understand and evaluate the following types of qualification:

- **English language proficiency** tests.
- International secondary school qualifications which assess English language proficiency.
- International higher education qualifications (equivalent to UK degree level or above) where English is the Medium of Instruction (**EMI**).
- **Pre-sessional English** courses which are offered by external providers (not embedded within the receiving institution).

Sections 2 and 3 of the Guide focus on good practice in the delivery of pre-sessional and pathway courses (before the degree programme) and in-sessional provision (during the degree programme).

1.2 Institutional Governance, policy and responsibility

1.2.1 Institutional English language policy

Institutions are responsible for assessing whether applicants can evidence an appropriate level of English language proficiency and, therefore, demonstrate the potential to succeed in their studies. It is important that the decision-making process around the acceptance of any English language qualification is clearly outlined in institutional English language policy documents. These should be transparent and readily available for key stakeholders including internal staff and external regulatory bodies, such as the **UKVI**.

1.2.2 Governance in approving qualifications: core components for evaluation

When determining whether any English language qualification may be deemed acceptable for entry, it is recommended that four core components form the framework for the decision-making process. The Core Evaluation Component model below summarises these overarching considerations which can be applied to any English language qualification or course provision, according to the needs of each institution.

- Accreditation
- Educational oversight
- Independent evaluation
- Research findings

Due Diligence

- Qualification/**course design**
- Assessment methods
- Test delivery and security
- Qualified **EAP** professionals and robust processes
- Verification of documentation and identification of fraudulent documents

Quality Assurance

Qualification evaluation

- Assessment tasks which are relevant for higher education study
- Assessment in reading, writing, listening and speaking
- Assessment exam tasks or learning outcomes mapped to **CEFR**

Monitoring and review

- Student **progression rates**
- Entry and exit grades
- Student and academic feedback
- Qualification changes and updates
- Institutional duty of care to the student

The core components can be summarised as follows:

- **Due Diligence:** Ensuring the qualification or course is offered by a reputable and recognised provider via accreditation, educational oversight and independent evaluation by a recognised third party or research studies.
- **Quality Assurance:** Ensuring the qualification or course is supported by robust quality assurance systems across its design, delivery, security measures and verification methods.
- **Qualification Evaluation:** Ensuring the qualification or course assessment reflects skills which are relevant to higher education study, offers assessment in all four skills of English, and is mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) at the required level.
- **Monitoring and Review:** Ensuring methods to monitor and review the qualification or course are in place at the outset, including tracking student academic outcomes, progression rates, student and academic feedback and provision for ongoing support as part of the institution's commitment to the duty of care.

The extent of evaluation undertaken is scalable, depending on the size, resources and needs of each institution. However, it is important that a rationale for acceptance of any qualification or course includes evidence gathered from each of the four components.

Sections 1.5 through to 1.8 provide further detail on how each consideration can be applied more specifically to the different types of tests.

1.2.3 Institutional roles in decision making

Robust institutional governance should ensure that any test reflects the skills required for higher education study and that decisions are fair, inclusive and transparent.

Good practice in accepting tests and qualifications may involve a cross-functional group or committee to make evaluations informed by the expertise of a full range of stakeholders across the institution. The group may be composed of EAP academics, academics from destination faculties or schools, recruitment, admissions and compliance staff.

The table below outlines the various roles that may contribute to decision making.

Stakeholder

Contribution

EAP academics

A thorough understanding of English language proficiency levels and the linguistic demands of the academic levels/areas of study enables assessment of what will be required for students to thrive academically. EAP academics will be familiar with how to assess the strengths of different types of language qualifications, and with what support is available to students within the institution. EAP academics will undertake any **mapping** to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

Faculty/School academics

Academics from destination faculties/schools bring insights into the communicative and cognitive demands of their specific **subject areas**. Their perspectives can offer valuable insight into how language proficiency supports students' engagement and success.

Recruitment staff

Recruitment professionals offer insights into applicant trends and the higher education systems of students' source countries, including local and regional variations in qualifications and access. Their knowledge of international student cohorts, education systems and sector benchmarks helps institutions in the entry requirement setting process.

Admissions staff

Admissions staff see that entry criteria are applied consistently, transparently and fairly. Their operational knowledge of qualification comparability, documentation verification, and regulatory compliance establish that qualifications and entry requirements are clearly defined, practical and manageable within the admissions process. Admissions staff also play a key role in assessing whether qualifications are authentic, ensuring the institution's fraudulent application procedures are applied consistently across academic and English language qualifications.

Compliance staff

Compliance teams advise on current UKVI regulations and visa requirements. Their input ensures the institution's compliance with UKVI requirements and sees that policies are legally robust.

Institutions may have different approaches to groups and committee structures, but good practice in governance of decisions on English language qualifications should always align to these essential steps:

A test or qualification is identified (often by an applicant or by recruitment staff) as having potential to evidence English language proficiency.

Information is gathered on the test or qualification, including:

- market insights and sector positioning;
- wider higher education recognition;
- how the qualification documentation will be verified as authentic and not fraudulent;
- and any other data available, including whether the qualification has undergone any accreditation, independent **validation** or mapping to the CEFR framework by external bodies. This stage may include meeting with representatives of the test provider.

Admissions teams are briefed on how to interpret the test or qualification grades against entry requirements, and verify the qualification as genuine and not fraudulent to inform clear and compliant offer making.

A senior group of accountable stakeholders considers the recommendation and makes a final decision.

EAP specialists review all test material, including :

- Test papers
- Marking schemes
- Security
- Approaches to marker training & standardisation
- Any available research

For tests, This is often publicly available in a Test
All information is evaluated and a recommendation made

The outcome is communicated, and the institution's marketing publications, policy documents and reference tools are updated.

The qualification is kept under review, through a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation.

Good practice in smaller institutions where complex governance structures for this purpose may not be feasible should involve other approaches to uphold robust decision making, for example:

- Engage external EAP academics or educational consultancies with expertise in language assessment and academic English. **BALEAP**, the UK professional body for EAP academics, is a key point of contact for accessing such expertise and guidance. Other sources of information on English language tests are listed in the **overview section** of this Guide.
- Empower academic, recruitment and admissions teams through targeted training in English language assessment literacy. This enhances understanding of what English language test scores and other qualifications signify and the nuances of measures of English language proficiency.
- Establish structured feedback channels with academic departments to capture ongoing insights into any linguistic challenges faced by users of English as an additional language and the staff teaching them, ensuring responsive and informed admissions practices.
- Use rigorous research evidence provided by test and qualification providers, recognising that high-quality tests are supported by robust, transparent and externally validated documentation of effectiveness and fairness.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of qualifications accepted through continuous tracking of **degree outcomes** and collaboration with academic colleagues.
- Whether by means of a formal group or through other decision-making processes as outlined above, good practice involves evidence-informed decisions on which tests and qualifications to approve. This includes evaluation against transparent criteria, as well as consideration of the specific English language demands of the different programmes and the context of applicants within the institution.

Case study

A relatively small-scale conservatoire offering undergraduate music and drama courses recently experienced an increase in interest from international applicants. A need was identified to establish a more structured process for setting English language entry requirements, approving tests and verifying qualifications. However, the conservatoire's student cohort is served by only two EAP practitioners, specialised more in the specific academic English required for creative arts **disciplines** rather than in assessment.

The conservatoire staff designed a simple process for English language governance, involving a small group of admissions and recruitment staff as well as input from EAP and other subject academics. The EAP team used their BALEAP network to draw on the expertise of the wider sectoral community to assist with decision making on tests. Admissions staff sought support from ECCTIS on the **benchmarking** of other qualifications. Continued monitoring of any new tests or qualifications accepted is led by subject academic staff who report on both quantitative and qualitative measures.

1.2.4 Suitability and Credibility decisions

Institutions may also conduct further checks to ensure students are a good fit for their chosen course of study, including interviews with academics or admissions staff. Student suitability interviews are not conducted by English language professionals and, therefore, cannot be used to assess English language proficiency. Instead, suitability interviews tend to focus on the following areas:

- Reason for pursuing the field of study.
- Evidence of previous work experience/ interests related to the field of study.
- Evidence of membership of clubs/ associations/professional bodies related to the field of study.
- Knowledge and understanding of the course.
- Reason for selecting this course at this institution (specific modules of study and research interests).
- Future plans and intentions associated to successful completion of course.
- Motivation for studying in the UK.

Interview results can be used to assess the student's commitment to the course and motivation for furthering their studies in the UK.

Governance of English language decisions - takeaways

- **Higher education providers** must evaluate English language tests and qualifications using robust governance processes in order to protect both the institution and its students
- Good practice involves cross-functional collaboration with expertise from EAP, recruitment, admissions, compliance and receiving academic teams
- Consideration needs to be given to academic demands, recruitment goals, student welfare and legal compliance e.g. UKVI regulations
- Decisions should be informed by independent research, benchmarking, and external expertise from trusted sources
- Evaluation of tests and qualifications should be on-going on a cyclical basis and informed by monitoring, leading to adjustments being made where needed

1.3 Assessing English Language Proficiency: The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

While there is no single global definition of language proficiency, this Guide refers to it as the ability to listen, speak, read and write effectively in English across everyday, professional and academic contexts. English language entry requirements may vary according to the course of study, but must, in all cases, meet or exceed the levels set by UKVI as mapped to the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages \(CEFR\)](#). Current UKVI requirements stipulate that applicants must possess a minimum level of CEFR B2 in all four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The CEFR is a widely recognised and comprehensive framework that outlines the knowledge and skills language learners employ in order to communicate effectively. The CEFR divides language proficiency into six levels, from A1 (the lowest level of proficiency) to C2 (the highest level of proficiency). This enables language abilities to be judged against a consistent standard, regardless of which test has been taken. Most major English language tests are mapped to the CEFR framework.

The CEFR describes language proficiency through “can do” statements (or descriptors) which outline tasks (or functions) that learners are able to perform at a given level. When mapping English language qualifications to the CEFR, institutions should map to the descriptors which reflect common tasks required for higher education study. The table below outlines some example descriptors for reading, writing, listening and speaking at CEFR B2 level which are relevant to higher education study. A good understanding of CEFR descriptors can help to inform the process of entry requirement setting in relation to the linguistic demands of each particular course of study.

Language skill

CEFR scale (language task or function)

CEFR “can do” descriptor at B2

Reading

Reading for orientation

Can scan quickly through several sources (articles, reports, websites, books, etc.) in parallel, in both their own field and in related fields, and can identify the relevance and usefulness of particular sections for the task at hand.

Writing

Reports and essays

Can produce an essay or report which develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail. Can produce a detailed description of a complex process. Can evaluate different ideas or solutions to a problem.

Reading and writing

Processing text in writing

Can summarise in writing the main content of complex texts on subjects related to their fields of interest and specialisation.

Listening

Understanding as a member of a live audience

Can follow the essentials of lectures, talks and reports and other forms of academic/professional presentation which are propositionally and linguistically complex.

Listening and writing

Note-taking (lectures, seminars, meetings, etc.)

Can take accurate notes in meetings and seminars on most matters likely to arise within their field of interest.

Speaking

Sustained monologue: putting in a case (e.g., in a debate)

Can develop a clear argument, expanding and supporting their points of view at some length with subsidiary points and relevant examples. Can construct a chain of reasoned argument. Can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

Listening and speaking (oral interaction)

Formal discussion (me

Can keep up with an animated discussion, identifying accurately arguments supporting and opposing points of view. Can use appropriate technical terminology when discussing their area of specialisation with other specialists. Can express their ideas and opinions with precision, and present and respond to complex lines of argument convincingly.

1.3.1 Setting entry requirements using the CEFR

Given the differing linguistic demands of academic study, English language entry requirements vary by subject and level of study. Setting English language entry requirements too low for specific programmes can lead to challenges for both students and institutions, and may impact sponsor compliance. Conversely, setting requirements too high may exclude academically capable students who could succeed with appropriate support.

Good practice involves a balanced, evidence-based approach to sustain **fair access** while supporting academic success. Benchmarking against requirements for similar programmes within the institution and with other institutions supports consistency and competitiveness, while participation in sector networks and organisations, such as BALEAP and the Quality Assurance Agency (**QAA**), helps maintain knowledge of sector good practice and developments as well as facilitating exchange of insights.

A number of stakeholders, including academics in receiving programmes, EAP academics, and recruitment and admissions staff, should contribute to decisions on entry requirements. Consultation between EAP academics and those working in other subject areas can align requirements to the linguistic demands of programmes. If students are transitioning from a pathway programme (see Section 2), pathway staff should also be consulted to establish that the duration and content of pathway learning is appropriately mapped to entry requirements.

Good practice consists of making decisions collaboratively with attention to the following key considerations:

- Academic and linguistic demands of the programme
- Student support available
- Alignment with institutional and sector policy
- Transparency and communication

Guiding questions when setting programme entry requirements:

Which language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing) are most critical for success in the chosen programme?

Are there specific genres, terminology, or communication tasks students need to master?

What level of English language proficiency is required for success in this programme, noting this may be above the current CEFR B2 minimum set by UKVI?

Is the programme undergraduate, or postgraduate (taught or research)?

Does the mode of study (e.g. lectures, seminars, group work) require high levels of interaction or independent work?

Do entry requirements align with university-wide standards and strategies (e.g. internationalisation, widening participation)?

Are requirements benchmarked to those of peer institutions?

What opportunities are available for students to continue to develop their academic skills and knowledge throughout their learning journey?

What do past student data (e.g. language test scores vs academic performance) tell us about the appropriateness of our current requirements?

English language entry requirements should be viewed as an integral element in quality assurance processes, requiring monitoring and regular review. Once a new programme is running, it is essential to monitor whether students are meeting progression expectations and to investigate whether staff or students are reporting language-related challenges on the programme.

Case study

Staff are planning to launch a new postgraduate programme in Human Rights Law. Their institution uses IELTS scores as its currency for English language entry requirements and the initial view of the programme director is that entry requirements could be set at IELTS 6.5 to align with entry requirements across the institution's other LLM programmes and noting that students currently perform well in these programmes.

As part of programme validation processes within the institution's quality regulations, a cross-functional committee is convened to review the programme proposal. Through discussion, it is established that students on the Human Rights Law programme may be required to demonstrate higher levels of English language proficiency compared to the institution's other LLM programmes, due to the expectation of full participation in regular seminar discussions which form a core part of learning. The EAP expert on the committee advises that these demands would be mapped to CEFR C1 and admissions staff confirm that peer institutions set English language entry requirements for similar programmes at IELTS 7.0 overall with a minimum of 6.5 in each skill component.

Taking into consideration feedback from academic staff that students often struggle with meaningful seminar participation in the Law **subject area**, the committee decides to set entry requirements at IELTS 7.0 overall with a minimum of 6.5 in all components except speaking, which has a minimum of 7.0.

Retention, outcomes and feedback from staff and students are reviewed once the programme is launched to monitor this decision.

Setting entry requirements - takeaways

English language entry requirements should be carefully calibrated to the linguistic demands of specific programmes of study, using an evidence-based approach to provide fair and appropriate access while supporting student success and compliance with UKVI requirements.

Good practice involves consultation between EAP practitioners, academics in receiving programmes, and recruitment and admissions staff to align requirements with linguistic demands and institutional strategy.

Benchmarking against the requirements of similar programmes, both internally and with peer institutions, supports consistency and competitiveness.

English language entry requirements should be considered an integral element in quality assurance processes, necessitating monitoring and regular review.

1.4 Evaluating English Language qualifications for entry to higher education

Higher education providers must employ a robust process to evaluate English language tests and other qualifications, including degrees taught in English in non-majority English speaking countries. This protects both the institution and its students. Good practice in these areas requires cross-functional communication and governance, drawing on expertise from EAP, recruitment, admissions, compliance and receiving academic teams.

Where an **English language proficiency test** is used, it must accurately measure what it claims to, and should adhere to key principles, including **authenticity, reliability, and test security** (see 1.5.1). Where an **English language qualification** is used, it should assess language skills for academic study. Where degrees taught in English are used, institutions must have a clear due diligence process to verify the legitimacy and quality of these degrees. Institutions should be able to confidently use test scores and other English language qualifications to assure best possible chances of successful future academic performance. Good practice includes use of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to facilitate the mapping of different tests and qualifications.

Benchmarking is an important practice in governance processes. It is common for institutions to compare their entry requirements and acceptance of tests with those of other higher education providers to align with sector standards.

While benchmarking with other institutions is a valuable practice and is recommended across the Guide, it is important to note that decisions should never be based solely on the approaches of other institutions as this risks circularity in decision making. Professional networks, such as BALEAP and others highlighted in this Guide, provide invaluable opportunities for collaborating with other institutions in this area and agreeing good practice, sharing research and experience.

It is important that higher education providers refer to independent research and sector-wide guidance when making decisions about tests and qualifications. This includes reviewing publications from professional bodies like BALEAP, as well as research and validation studies produced by test and qualification providers themselves if these are transparent and robust. Organisations such as ECCTIS can also assist with independent benchmarking and qualification comparability. This is likely to be particularly valuable for smaller institutions who may not have readily available resources in terms of EAP expertise.

Ongoing evaluation of accepted tests and qualifications is essential and good practice in this area requires regular monitoring of student performance using quantitative indicators (progression, retention, degree outcomes), alongside qualitative feedback from students, academic staff and EAP specialists. These data should be used to inform test acceptance and admissions policy. This ensures entry standards remain fit for purpose, mitigating non-completion and potential failure to meet compliance requirements in the **Basic Compliance Assessment**.

Best practice in sustaining student success involves a holistic approach that integrates initial assessment with comprehensive English support.

1.5 English Language proficiency tests

English language tests remain a primary tool for determining applicants' proficiency levels. The UK Home Office operates an approved list of Secure English Language Tests (SELTs) that are accepted for visa purposes. Most students applying for pre-degree study who require a visa must undertake a **SELT**. At degree level study, however, students may present alternative evidence of English language proficiency which higher education providers with a track record of compliance can assess as evidence of English language. This allows students more flexibility to select qualifications that better suit their circumstances or specific programmes of study, for example, the Occupational English Test (OET) for healthcare students. It also promotes fair access and inclusion by allowing students to choose from a wider range of tests based on costs and **accessibility**. All tests must demonstrate comparable **validity** and reliability (see 1.5.1 below), and coverage of all four language skills and scores must be mapped to the CEFR.

In-house English Language Tests

Some higher education providers design and administer their own English language tests. These may be used for internal progression or for new entrants in cases where external testing options are limited. Such tests are typically restricted to the institution's own offer-holders and are valid only for admission to that provider or its partner institutions. In-house English language tests must meet the same criteria for acceptance, including mapping to the CEFR by EAP professionals, as any other accepted test.

1.5.1 What makes a good language test?

In order to make decisions on what tests to approve, it is important to understand key concepts around what makes a good test. These include validity and validation, authenticity, test security, reliability and **washback**.

Validity

Validity refers to how accurately a test measures a person's true ability (Messick, 1989). A key aspect is **construct validity**, which concerns whether a test truly measures the specific skill or ability it claims to assess (Fulcher, 1999; Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Construct validity underpins the design of quality language tests, and authentic and meaningful interpretations of test scores.

Validation

Validation is the process of gathering evidence to support the interpretations made from test scores. It is central to language testing research; integral to fair, reliable and meaningful assessments. **Predictive validity** studies are especially valuable, as they show whether students who met entry requirements through a particular test perform as expected on their degree programmes.

Authenticity

Authenticity concerns how closely test tasks mirror the real-life language use required in academic or professional settings (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), so that assessments are relevant and meaningful, reflecting the communicative demands students will encounter beyond the test itself.

When evaluating tests for admissions purposes, the following are examples of questions that can be asked regarding construct validity and authenticity:

Overall quality of tests: guiding questions

Does the test or qualification content reflect the linguistic and communicative demands of academic or professional contexts, rather than general or everyday English?

Are the tasks representative of real-life academic or professional communication that students will encounter?

Do the tasks require the types of cognitive operations (e.g. analysis, synthesis, **critical thinking**) expected in UK academic settings?

Is there a sufficient range of cognitive processes across the tasks, not just surface-level comprehension or recall?

Does the test assess all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), either as separate components or in integrated tasks?

Is there independent, transparent evidence that the test or qualification reliably assesses language ability at CEFR B2 level or higher?

Test security

Test Security refers to the measures and practices implemented to prevent the unauthorised disclosure of test content and to maintain the integrity and fairness of the assessment process. It involves protecting test materials from cheating, fraud and misuse, both before, during and after administration. Test security is essential to achieving results that are the most faithful possible reflection of a candidate's knowledge or ability, maintaining the validity of the scores and the credibility of the certification.

Below are suggested questions that can be asked regarding test security:

Test security: guiding questions

Who has access to the test question bank and how is it protected/encrypted?

How are equivalent test forms used to deter memorisation and content leakage?

How are test materials stored and/or transported to different test centres?

How are candidate identities verified, and what proctoring or monitoring systems are used?

What procedures are in place to prevent malpractice, especially in online or remote testing or assessment environments?

What arrangements are in place to identify misconduct and deal with any suspected misconduct (e.g. inappropriate use of Generative Artificial Intelligence tools)?

Reliability

Reliability is defined as the consistency of test performance reflected in the test scores. Score reliability depends on accurate and consistent rater (or marker) behaviour (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). Therefore, to maintain rating quality, test providers must use raters who are qualified and well-trained, and have systems in place to measure and monitor scoring reliability and consistency.

Below are questions that can be asked regarding reliability:

Reliability: guiding question

Who is responsible for scoring? Are human raters, AI tools or both used?

When AI tools are used in scoring, how are fairness and inclusivity ensured, for example, in terms of avoiding accent bias?

What qualifications or experience are required of raters or speaking examiners?

What initial training and ongoing standardisation do they receive?

How is marking reliability monitored (e.g. double marking, benchmarking, statistical checks)?

Washback

Washback is the impact the test or preparation for the test might have on individuals (Messick, 1996). When well-designed, tests can promote meaningful learning experiences and drive improvements in student preparedness. For example, a student preparing to take an academic English test decides to focus on developing their academic writing skills. Their preparation results in a good score and they have achieved the goal of performing well in the test. The positive washback effect is that, in addition to passing the test, they have now developed writing skills which will be used for wider purposes throughout their academic journey, beyond the purpose of a good test score.

One Nigerian student expressed in a focus group discussion that, “It [the test] did prepare me [for my university study] [...] I think where I struggled a bit was the writing. It [the test] made me kind of more aware about my writing and how I write and how I use the different components in my writing”. The student’s reflection indicates the test served a vital diagnostic function by exposing a weakness in writing ability, which subsequently fostered self-awareness regarding their approach to writing and preparedness for higher education studies.

Below are suggested questions that can be asked regarding washback:

Washback: guiding questions

Does the test or qualification encourage productive language learning behaviours (e.g. extended writing, spoken interaction, academic reading)?

Is the preparation process likely to support students’ future academic success, or does it encourage narrow test-taking strategies?

Are the skills promoted through preparation aligned with the communicative demands of higher education study?

Accessibility and Equity

A good test also needs to be accessible, providing adjustments for candidates with disabilities and fostering equity by removing cultural or socio-economic barriers. Ensuring a high-quality test-taker preparation experience is also key in terms of accessibility. Together, these factors contribute to ensuring that the resulting scores are a valid and unbiased reflection of ability, not irrelevant external conditions.

Below are suggested questions that can be asked:

Accessibility and equity: guiding questions

Is the test accessible to individuals with disabilities (e.g. via extended time, screen readers, alternative formats)? What provisions exist to establish that the adjustments still enable accurate assessment of language proficiency?

What provisions exist to maintain that content is inclusive for all ages, genders, and nationalities?

What provisions exist for candidates with low income, unstable living conditions or refugee status?

Is the test available in key regions or markets, and are there flexible delivery modes (e.g. test centre, at-home, paper-based)?

Is the registration process clear and accessible in all regions where it is offered?

What accommodations are made in regions with frequent connectivity issues or power outages?

Are high-quality, freely available preparation materials available (e.g. practice tests, familiarisation guides)?

Specific considerations will also be required when evaluating digital tests. These may be beneficial in terms of the use of adaptive technology, which adjusts the difficulty of questions based on test-taker responses, resulting in a more efficient, personalised and often more inclusive test-taker experience. However, there may be concerns around the authenticity of test items as well as in relation to test security. The example evaluation process below provides recommended guidance on evaluating an online English language test.

Case study

Following the launch of a new digital English language test, a senior recruitment manager identified strong interest in the test from prospective students in one of the institution's largest regions for international applicants. The recruitment manager reached out to the convenor of the institution's Admissions Qualifications Group to suggest that the new test should be considered as evidence of English language proficiency, noting that several peer institutions already accept the test.

The convenor of the Admissions Qualifications Group contacted the institution's language centre to request that the new test be reviewed. Several EAP assessment experts reviewed the test materials, using criteria agreed by the Admissions Qualifications Group. A fact-finding meeting was also held with representatives of the test provider.

A report was generated outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the test. The EAP reviewers determined that the test harnesses digital tools in innovative ways to improve security and makes good use of adaptive technology to provide a more efficient and therefore potentially more inclusive test taker experience. However, they also concluded that the test tasks do not mirror the real-life academic demands of study at their institution and they noted that no independent peer reviewed research exists to provide assurance that students taking this test will be successful on programme. The recommendation of the report was that the test should not be accepted until such research is available.

The report and its recommendations were discussed in an Admissions Qualification Group meeting and a decision was made by consensus not to accept the test. The decision and rationale were minuted and all papers related to the review were stored in an Admissions Qualifications sharepoint, providing convenient access to information should the decision be revisited in the future.

Criteria to consider in test approval - takeaways

A good test is built on key principles – including validity and validation, authenticity, reliability, test security, and washback – all of which contribute to fair, accurate and meaningful assessment of language ability.

Validity and validation focus on whether a test truly measures what it claims to assess and on gathering evidence to support the interpretation of scores, including predictive validity to check how well test scores reflect later academic performance.

A good test must reflect authentic, real-life language use relevant to academic settings.

Effective tests promote positive learning impacts, encouraging student development and preparedness.

Digital tests can benefit from adaptive technology for personalized experiences but must ensure authenticity and security. Independent research is crucial for validation.

A comprehensive evaluation process involves expert review and alignment with academic standards before accepting a test, ensuring it meets institutional needs.

1.5.2 Example process: Evaluating an online English test

The process below provides an example of key stages, documents and evidence required when evaluating an online English language test.

- Must have documents
- Useful but not always possible to obtain
- Best practice but may not be available

Key documents required:

- Confirmation of quality assurance systems
- Sample test tasks (computer-based tests may offer sample exam tasks for analysis)
- Current mark schemes which match the exam tasks
- Test specification and security information
- Anonymised test taker writing and speaking samples which show examiner/ AI marking

The documents listed above should be obtained directly from the test provider. Documents, website links, email correspondence with the provider and internal mapping to the CEFR should be saved centrally within the institution and readily available for audit purposes.

Evaluation stage

Stage 1: Quality assurance systems in test design and security

Process

- Determine whether the test is supported by robust quality assurance systems with regards to test design and administration (e.g., qualified EAP staff who undertake test design, invigilation and marking, test tasks are kept securely).
- Determine whether the test is supported by robust research which evidences the validity and reliability of the test (the test provider should be able to explain this research to anon-specialist audience).
- Determine whether the test is supported by robust security measures. Consider the following:
 - Test location- is the test taken in a test centre or available to take remotely in the test taker's home?
 - What device(s) can be used to take the test (e.g., PC or mobile phone)?
 - How is the identity of the test taker verified online (e.g., facial scan)?
 - How is the test administered securely (e.g., is the browser locked down to prevent access to online resources)?
 - How is the test invigilated remotely (e.g., is there a human invigilator or AI detection of academic misconduct)?
- Determine how the test is marked (e.g., machine marked or human marked or both).

Evidence saved

- Test specification
- Correspondence with test providers
- Independent evaluations from external organisations (e.g., Ecctis)

Evaluation stage

Stage 2: Assessment and CEFR mapping

Process

- Analyse exam tasks for all four skills of English (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and map exam tasks to ensure a minimum of CEFR B2 level is assessed (or higher if required). Consider whether the exam tasks assess skills which are authentic, relevant and useful in a higher education/academic setting, particularly whether speaking and writing tasks require long enough answers to accurately assess proficiency, whether reading and listening texts reflect B2 language and are not too simplistic.
- Analyse mark schemes for speaking and writing skills and map the minimum grades which are required to meet CEFR B2 level (or higher if required).
- Analyse marked test taker samples (if available) to fully understand how students are assessed against speaking and writing mark schemes.

Evidence saved

- Sample tasks with dates
- Mark schemes which match the exam papers
- Marked test taker samples for speaking and writing (machine and/or human marked)
- Internal mapping of exam papers

Evaluation stage

Stage 3: Grading

Process

- Determine what grade (or grades if more than one) is required to reflect CEFR B2, or above. The test provider should be able to offer this information based on their own research. It is important that any grade alignment research is underpinned by robust quality assurance processes.

Evidence saved

- Internal mapping and grade alignment
- Test provider research on grade alignment

Evaluation stage

**Stage 4:
Sector
research**

Process

- Research whether the qualification is widely accepted across UK higher education and international higher education. If so, it is useful to cross check other institutions' entry requirements.

Evidence saved

- Market research and sector analysis

Evaluation stage

**Stage 5:
Other
information**

Process

- Record any other relevant information, such as whether the qualification enables wider access to UK higher education, whether it caters for test takers with additional needs.

Evidence saved

- Test provider information

Evaluation stage

**Stage 6:
Decision and
Rationale**

Process

- Determine whether the qualification is to be accepted (or not) and record the date and department/job role for the authorising member of staff.

Evidence saved

- Internal decision making/ sign off documents

Evaluation stage

Stage 7: Monitor and Review

Process

- Track progress and progression outcomes for applicants enrolling with the qualification.
- Review the qualification annually to check for any changes to the curriculum or assessment.

Evidence saved

- Internal monitoring and review documents

1.6 International secondary school qualifications

Many countries offer English Language secondary school qualifications, such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (iGCSE), or the International Baccalaureate (IB). Applicants presenting these qualifications are often accepted by UK institutions without additional testing.

Secondary school qualifications in English Language may form part of the national school curriculum, where educational oversight is provided by the relevant Ministry of Education or an official awarding body. Learning and assessment outcomes may be designed to meet specified CEFR levels and intended to assess English as a First Language, or English as a Second Language. As such, assessment tasks vary accordingly and map to different areas of the CEFR.

Assessment may also be undertaken in the form of course work during the school year, end of year examinations or a mixture of both. It is important to understand how the final grade (or grades) is comprised and to identify what language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are represented by the grade(s).

1.6.1 Example process: Evaluating international secondary school qualifications

Providers should take a multi-layered approach to gathering documents for evaluation. Some documents are required to make decisions. Others are useful for further information and context but may not always be available.

Key documents required:

- Confirmation of educational oversight of the course
- Recent (still valid) past exam papers
- Recent (still valid) mark schemes which match the exam papers
- Upper secondary English language curriculum and/or syllabus
- Anonymised test taker writing and speaking samples which show examiner marking

The documents listed above should be obtained from official websites or provided directly from the relevant authority (e.g., Ministry of Education, Matriculation or examination awarding body). Documents, website links, email correspondence with authorities and internal mapping to the CEFR should be saved centrally within the institution and readily available for audit purposes.

Evaluation stage

Stage 1: Educational oversight and quality assurance

Process

- Determine which official body is responsible for providing educational oversight and quality assurance for the course and the assessment. For upper secondary qualifications, this would typically be the Ministry of Education or Matriculation/ examination awarding body.
- Determine whether the qualification is assessed internally (by schools) or externally by the exam board or a mixture of both. If assessments are set internally by schools, it may not be possible to map a centralised test which all students will sit.

Evidence saved

- Ministry of Education/ awarding body websites, documents sent directly by the relevant authority, email correspondence with relevant authorities

Evaluation stage

Stage 2: English language curriculum/ syllabus and CEFR mapping (if available)

Process

- Determine whether the curriculum/ syllabus confirms assessment in all four skills of English (reading, writing, listening and speaking). If not, it will not be possible to accept the qualification without further supporting assessment from the institution (e.g., an institution's speaking test if there is no speaking assessment included).
- Determine whether the curriculum/ syllabus states learning and/ or assessment objectives which reference CEFR levels. If so, it is likely that the course has been designed to meet specific CEFR levels.
- Determine whether the curriculum/ syllabus states learning and/ or assessment objectives which are not mapped to CEFR levels. If so, map these objectives to the CEFR.
- Determine whether the qualification is assessed during the course (formative assessment), at the end of the course in final exams (summative assessment) or a mixture of both. It is important to understand how the final grade (or grades) is comprised.

Evidence saved

- Curriculum and/ or syllabus
- Internal mapping of learning and/ or assessment objectives to the CEFR

Evaluation stage

Stage 3: Assessment and CEFR

Process

- Analyse exam papers for all four skills of English (reading, writing, listening and speaking and map exam tasks to ensure a minimum of CEFR B2 level is assessed (or higher if required). Consider best practice tips such as the whether the exam tasks assess skills which are relevant and useful in a higher education/academic setting, whether speaking and writing tasks require long enough answers to accurately assess proficiency, whether reading and listening texts reflect B2 language and are not too simplistic.

Evidence saved

- Exam papers with dates
- Mark schemes which match the exam papers
- Marked test taker samples for speaking and writing (if available)

- Analyse mark schemes for speaking and writing skills and map the minimum grades which are required to meet CEFR B2 level (or higher if required).
- Analyse marked test taker samples (if available) to fully understand how students are assessed against speaking and writing mark schemes.

- Internal mapping of exam papers

Evaluation stage

**Stage 4:
Gradingmapping
(if available)**

Process

- Determine what grade (or grades if more than one) is required to reflect CEFR B2, or above. If one final grade is given, it is important to ensure that the required entry grade is set high enough to ensure a minimum of CEFR B2 is reached in all four skills.

Evidence saved

- Internal mapping and grade alignment

Evaluation stage

**Stage 5:
Sector
research**

Process

- Research whether the qualification is widely accepted across UK higher education and international higher education. If so, it is useful to cross check other institutions' entry requirements.

Evidence saved

- Market research and sector analysis

Evaluation stage

Stage 6: Other Information

Process

- Record any other relevant information, such as whether the qualification enables wider access to UK higher education, whether it caters for test takers with additional needs.

Evidence saved

- Wider research about the qualification

Evaluation stage

Stage 7: Decision and Rationale

Process

- Determine whether the qualification is to be accepted (or not) and record the date and department/job role for the authorising member of staff.

Evidence saved

- Internal decision making/sign off documents

Evaluation stage

Stage 8: Monitor and Review

Process

- Track progress and progression outcomes for applicants enrolling with the qualification.
- Review the qualification annually to check for any changes to the curriculum or assessment.

Evidence saved

- Internal monitoring and review documents

1.7 Degrees taught and assessed in the medium of English

Degree study entirely in English can also demonstrate that English requirements are met, including degrees undertaken in non-majority English speaking countries. EMI at degree level study offers a valuable insight into how an applicant has performed academically throughout the duration of a course, as opposed to a snapshot picture which is provided by a stand-alone test. Good practice involves careful processes of auditing and verification to establish that learning and assessment has truly been undertaken in English and that the resulting qualification can therefore be treated as reliable evidence. Good practice also involves giving attention to the validity period of such qualifications, i.e. how recently the degree was completed. Linguistics research does not provide clear evidence of

language deterioration over time once higher levels of proficiency are reached, even without regular use, noting that attrition of proficiency is highly individualised and variable (Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012). However, institutions have a duty to consider the support that might be needed for a student to 'recover' proficiency after a long period of not using the language. Most institutions therefore do not accept degrees undertaken in English unless they were completed within a specific time limit.

When determining whether a qualification is appropriate, a number of factors should be considered as part of good practice in governance. The example evaluation processes below outline full checklists which apply to upper secondary and degree level EMI qualifications. Good practice also involves verifying the authenticity of documents presented by applicants. For degree level EMI qualification, documents must be provided directly by the degree-awarding institution and not an affiliated college.

Questions to consider in qualifications approval

Linguistic Demands of the Qualification

- Does the qualification entail English language study through English-medium instruction?
- Does assessment cover key skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) at a level comparable to UK entry standards?

Medium of Instruction and Assessment

- Is teaching and assessment delivered in English, within an academic context?
- Is the language of instruction verifiable through official documentation?

Comparability and Recognition

- Does the qualification align with official national or international frameworks and come from a recognised awarding body? – ECCTIS provides resources and official confirmation on the level, accreditation and recognition of international qualifications.
- Is the qualification widely accepted by other UK institutions?

Duration and Recency

- Have applicants completed a sustained period of English-medium study (e.g., three years at undergraduate level or one year at postgraduate level)?
- Has the qualification been obtained recently enough to be sure that English language proficiency has not deteriorated?

Student Achievement

- Has the applicant achieved strong, consistent grades in English-medium subjects or modules?

Institutional Quality and Context

- Is the provider of the qualification subject to recognised quality assurance?
- Does the learning environment demonstrate effective delivery of English-medium education?

Alignment with Programme Requirements

- Does the destination programme have higher linguistic demands that require stronger or more specialised evidence of proficiency?

1.7.1 Example process: Evaluating degrees taught and assessed in the medium of English

Key documents required:

Providers should take a multi-layered approach to gathering documents for evaluation. Some documents are required to make decisions. Others are useful for further information and context but may not always be available.

- Official Medium of Instruction (**MOI**) letter from the awarding institution confirming full applicant details, full programme name and dates, and confirmation the programme was fully taught and assessed in the medium of English
- Official transcript from the awarding institution confirming all modules of study contained in the programme
- Overseas National Higher Education policy documents
- Overseas Quality Assurance for Higher Education policy and/or academic standards documents
- Overseas Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body (PSRB) policy documents
- Overseas awarding institution policy documents
- Overseas degree programme specification and/or assessment details
- Examples of graduate theses or dissertations from the programme (may be published on the awarding institution website to demonstrate expected standards)

MOI letters should be provided directly from the recognised awarding institution, on official letter headed paper, signed and stamped by named, authorised university personnel, such as a Registrar. The policy documents listed above should be obtained from official websites or provided directly from the relevant authority. Documents, website links, email correspondence with authorities and internal mapping to the CEFR should be saved centrally and readily available for audit purposes.

Evaluation stage

Stage 1: Qualification and institution verification

Process

- Verify that the awarding institution is recognised and has the relevant degree awarding authority.
- Verify that the degree programme is accredited by the relevant authority.
- Verify that the degree is comparable to a UK degree.
- Verify that the MOI letter includes all the required information and meets the receiving institution's expectations with regards to format.
- Check the qualification is still within the receiving institution's validity period.

Evidence saved

- Official overseas sources of verification (as stated on UK ENIC database)
- UK ENIC confirmation

Evaluation stage

Stage 2: EMI policy research (if policy documents are available)

Process

- Research whether there is a national education policy which confirms EMI for the institution/field of study/programme.
- Research whether there is a higher education quality assurance policy or academic standards policy which confirms EMI for the institution/field of study/programme.
- Research whether there is a PSRB policy which confirms EMI for field of study/programme.
- Research whether there is an institutional policy which confirms EMI across the entire institution/field of study/programme.

Evidence saved

- Policy documents from official websites or documents received directly from the relevant authority

Evaluation stage

Stage 3: Programme specification (if available)

Process

- Analyse the programme specification to determine whether the course is fully taught and assessed in the medium of English.
- Analyse the programme specification to determine whether the learning environment requires engagement in all four skills of English and, if so, benchmark the skills required to the CEFR (e.g., the ability to listen and take notes in lectures, to speak in oral presentations, to read specialist material or write extended essays- these skills can be benchmarked to the CEFR).

Evidence saved

- Programme specification with internal CEFR benchmarking

Evaluation stage

Stage 4: Assessment

Process

- Analyse the programme assessment methods and/or the transcript to determine whether examination tasks require communication in all four skills of English. If so, benchmark the skills required to the CEFR (e.g., a thesis will require reading and writing skills, an oral defence/ viva voce will require speaking and listening skills).

Evidence saved

- Assessment methods as stated in the programme specification
- Assessment stated on the transcript

Evaluation stage

Stage 5: Sector research

Process

- Research whether the qualification is widely accepted across UK higher education and international higher education. If so, it is useful to cross check other institutions' entry requirements.

Evidence saved

- Market research and sector analysis

Evaluation stage

Stage 6: Other information

Process

- Record any other relevant information, such as whether the qualification enables wider access to UK higher education.

Evidence saved

- Wider research

Evaluation stage

Stage 7: Decision and Rationale

Process

- Determine whether the qualification is to be accepted (or not) and record the date and department/job role for the authorising member of staff.

Evidence saved

- Internal decision making/ sign off documents

Evaluation stage

Stage 8: Monitor and Review

Process

- Track progress and progression outcomes for applicants enrolling with the qualification.
- Review the qualification annually to check for any changes to the curriculum or assessment.

Evidence saved

- Internal monitoring and review documents

1.8 Pre-sessional English courses from other providers

Pre-sessional courses delivered by external providers may be considered as acceptable evidence of English language proficiency. These courses are delivered by providers other than the receiving institution, including those within the private sector or other higher education institutions. The same level of evaluation and scrutiny should be conducted on the provider, the quality assurance processes supporting course design and delivery, the assessment methods and the verification of results. Section 2 of the Guide outlines detailed guidance on what good practice in preparatory provision entails.

1.8.1 Example process: Evaluating Pre-sessional courses from other providers

Key documents required:

Providers should take a multi-layered approach to gathering documents for evaluation. Some documents are required to make decisions. Others are useful for further information and context but may not always be available. Confirmation of educational oversight/ accreditation of the course

- Recent (still valid) exam papers
- Recent (still valid) mark schemes which match the exam papers
- Course specification and curriculum/ syllabus
- Anonymised test taker writing and speaking samples which show examiner marking

The documents listed above should be obtained directly from the pre-sessional provider. Documents, website links, email correspondence with the provider and internal mapping to the CEFR should be saved centrally within the institution and readily available for audit purposes.

Evaluation stage

Stage 1: Educational oversight and quality assurance

Process

- Determine which official body is responsible for providing educational oversight and quality assurance for the course and the assessment. This may be a UK higher education provider, or an accreditation body such as BALEAP, the British Council or the Independent Schools Inspectorate. It is important to check that the accreditation covers the teaching and learning of English, as opposed to other academic subjects which may be offered on **pathway programmes**, noting that only BALEAP offers specialised accreditation of EAP provision.
- Determine whether the course and the assessment is supported by robust quality assurance systems, as per the accreditation regulations (e.g., properly qualified EAP staff who undertake course design, assessment design and examination, internal and external exam moderation processes, and test security measures to ensure tests are stored and administered securely).

Evidence saved

- Course specification and curriculum
- Quality assurance documentation from the provider
- Accreditation reports from external agencies (e.g. BALEAP, the British Council/ Independent Schools Inspectorate)
- Independent evaluations from external organisations (e.g., Ecctis)

Evaluation stage

Stage 2: English language curriculum/ syllabus and CEFR mapping

Process

- Determine whether the curriculum/ syllabus confirms assessment in all four skills of English (reading, writing, listening and speaking). If not, it will not be possible to accept the qualification without further supporting assessment from the institution (e.g., an institution's speaking test if there is no speaking assessment included).
- Determine whether the curriculum/ syllabus states learning and/or assessment objectives which reference CEFR levels. If so, it is likely that the course has been designed to meet specific CEFR levels. It is recommended that internal CEFR mapping is conducted to ensure agreement with the pre-sessional provider's own mapping.
- Determine whether the curriculum/ syllabus states learning and/or assessment objectives which are not mapped to CEFR levels. If so, map these objectives to the CEFR.
- Determine whether the qualification is assessed during the course (formative assessment), at the end of the course in final exams (summative assessment) or a mixture of both. It is important to understand how the final grade (or grades) is comprised.

Evidence saved

- Curriculum and/or syllabus
- Internal mapping of learning and/or assessment objectives to the CEFR

Evaluation stage

Stage 3: Assessment and CEFR mapping

Process

- Analyse exam papers or assessment information for all four skills of English (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and map exam tasks to ensure a minimum of CEFR B2 level is assessed (or higher if required). Consider whether assessments are relevant and useful in a higher education/academic setting, whether speaking and writing tasks require long enough answers to accurately assess proficiency, whether reading and listening texts reflect B2 language and are not too simplistic, noting that good practice in pre-sessional provision goes beyond language.

Evidence saved

- Exam papers or assessment instructions with dates
- Mark schemes which match assessments

- proficiency and involves the development of broader academic skills and an understanding of the linguistic expectations of particular disciplines.
- Analyse mark schemes for speaking and writing skills and map the minimum grades which are required to meet CEFR B2 level (or higher if required).
- Analyse marked student samples (if available) to fully understand how students are assessed against speaking and writing mark schemes.

- Marked assessment samples for speaking and writing (if available)
- Internal mapping of assessments

Evaluation stage

Stage 4: Grading

Process

- Determine what grade (or grades if more than one) is required to reflect CEFR B2, or above. If one final grade is given, it is important to ensure that the required entry grade is set high enough to ensure a minimum of CEFR B2 is reached in all four skills. The pre-sessional provider may be able to offer this information based on their own research. It is important that any grade alignment research is underpinned by robust quality assurance processes.

Evidence saved

- Internal mapping and grade alignment
- Pre-sessional provider research on grade alignment

Evaluation stage

Stage 5: Sector research

Process

- Research whether the qualification is widely accepted across UK higher education and international higher education. If so, it is useful to cross check other institutions' entry requirements.

Evidence saved

- Market research and sector analysis

Evaluation stage

**Stage 6:
Other
information**

Process

- Record any other relevant information, such as whether the qualification enables wider access to UK higher education, whether it caters for students with additional needs.

Evidence saved

- Pre-sessional provider course information

Evaluation stage

**Stage 7:
Decision and
Rationale**

Process

- Determine whether the qualification is to be accepted (or not) and record the date and department/job role for the authorising member of staff.

Evidence saved

- Internal decision making/sign off documents

Evaluation stage

**Stage 8:
Monitor and
Review**

Process

- Track progress and progression outcomes for applicants enrolling with the qualification.
- Review the qualification annually to check for any changes to the curriculum or assessment.

Evidence saved

- Internal monitoring and review documents

1.9 Monitoring and Review

In order to assess the appropriateness of tests and qualifications, it is important for higher education providers to monitor how students perform over time. Predictive validity refers to how well test scores indicate future academic success. By reviewing this regularly, providers can be confident that the tests they accept remain appropriate and effective. As many factors influence academic outcomes, a broad and balanced approach to gathering evidence is needed, as well as institutional systems to support collection of data. Although, as noted above, language test scores cannot directly predict degree results, patterns in student performance and feedback can guide informed, evidence-based decisions.

Measuring success

Institutions commonly use the following indicators to measure student academic success:

- **Progression rate:** The percentage of students who successfully move from one year of their programme to the next
- **Completion rate:** The percentage of students who remain enrolled in their programme from start to finish
- **Degree outcomes:** The final degree classifications achieved - unit or year outcomes can also be used for more nuanced analysis

However, academic performance issues are not necessarily related to English language proficiency, as multiple factors can contribute. These include understanding English **academic literacies** (see Section 3) or a lack of academic skills in students' first language. Students may also have different aptitudes for their subjects or may be impacted by ill health, homesickness, or financial pressures. It is also important to analyse performance in relation to the specific test taken, the score presented at entry, and the date this score was achieved.

To more fully address these nuances, good practice in evaluation and monitoring includes gathering relevant qualitative data from key stakeholders. Student feedback can provide insights into preparedness and challenges faced, while academics in destination schools or programmes can offer perspectives on how students' language skills impact their ability to engage. EAP staff can highlight common linguistic or academic issues faced by users of English as an additional language, which may point to gaps in entry requirements and accepted tests.

The following are key questions that these stakeholders can be asked:

Key questions in evaluation and monitoring of qualification acceptance

Students:

- How prepared did you feel for the linguistic demands of your programme when you started?
- Were there any specific academic language skills, such as academic writing or participating in seminars, that you found particularly challenging?
- What do you think could have better prepared you for the academic language used in your lectures and readings?
- Do you feel that your English language qualification accurately reflects your ability to succeed in your studies?

Academics in schools/programmes:

- What are the main linguistic challenges you observe among users of English as an additional language in your courses?
- Are there specific language skills that you find essential for success in your subject area?
- In what ways, if any, do language barriers seem to affect student participation and performance in assessments?
- What is available or can/should be provided so that students can engage effectively with course content? (embedded sessions/workshops to help students enhance their academic literacies, etc)

EAP Staff:

- What are the most common language-related issues that users of English as an additional language seek support for?
- Do you notice any recurring patterns in the types of academic or communication challenges faced by these students?
- Do you have any insights on whether the current entry requirements from the accepted tests are meeting students' needs?

Once all evidence has been analysed, findings should be reviewed by the relevant group or committee. If the evidence suggests that changes are needed, a proposal for adjusting entry requirements or tests accepted should be presented, along with a clear rationale for how the proposed changes will improve student success.

Case study

A university in Northern Ireland demonstrates good practice through its proactive approach to monitoring English language admissions. Following agreement on the relevant metrics with EAP colleagues, the admissions team routinely reviews student progress and outcomes, tracking each cohort's academic performance against their entry qualifications. Regular discussions between admissions staff and EAP and receiving academic departments ensure emerging issues are identified early and good practices shared. This on-going collaboration promotes transparency and continuous improvement, ensuring that English language entry standards remain appropriate, and that students receive the support they need to succeed. Such systematic, joined up follow-up reflects a strong institutional commitment to quality assurance.

This approach demonstrates a commitment to evidence-based decision-making and highlights the value of collaboration between EAP and receiving academics and admissions teams in maintaining appropriate standards for English language proficiency. It is essential that the right data is collected and that EAP expertise informs any decisions on whether to continue accepting a test or qualification on the basis of tracking data.

Evaluating and monitoring tests and qualifications - takeaways

Regular monitoring of student performance enables higher education providers to assess whether accepted English language tests and qualifications remain appropriate and supportive of academic success.

Predictive validity focuses on how well test scores indicate future academic outcomes, but since many factors influence performance, good practice consists of a broad, evidence-based approach to evaluation.

Quantitative indicators such as progression, retention and degree outcomes should be analysed alongside qualitative feedback from students, academic staff, and EAP specialists to build a full picture of effectiveness.

Collaboration between admissions, subject area and EAP academic teams is essential to interpreting data, identifying trends, and ensuring that entry standards and support mechanisms remain fit for purpose.

Continuous review and evidence-informed adjustments to entry requirements demonstrate good practice in quality assurance and support equitable student success.

Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Academic discourses	The specialised ways of using language, communication and reasoning that construct and convey knowledge within academic communities. They reflect the conventions, values and methods of particular disciplines or fields of study.
Academic language and literacy skills	The specialised language abilities and communication practices needed to understand, produce and engage with academic texts and discourse. They include listening, speaking, reading and writing in ways that meet the conventions and expectations of higher education study.
Academic literacies	The range of skills, practices and ways of thinking required to produce and interpret meaning in academic contexts. It recognises that writing, reading and communication are socially situated and shaped by disciplinary, cultural and institutional expectations.
Access and Participation Plan (APP)	A strategic document required by the Office for Students (OfS) in the UK that outlines how higher education providers will improve access, success and progression for students from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. They set measurable commitments to promote equity and inclusion across the student lifecycle.
Accessibility	The extent to which assessments and learning environments are fair and inclusive for all students, including those with disabilities or diverse backgrounds.
Assessment for learning	A concept fostering an approach to assessment that focuses on support for learning rather than only measurement of learning.
Authenticity	The degree to which a test reflects real-world or academic language use and tasks.
Benchmarking	The practice of comparing practice with that of other higher education providers to assure alignment with sector standards eg entry requirements, tests accepted, mix of in-sessional provision offered.
British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP)	The global forum for EAP professionals, BALEAP is a professional organisation that supports the teaching and research of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education. It provides accreditation, training and resources to promote high standards and good practice in EAP provision.

Basic Compliance Assessment (BCA)	A UK government system that evaluates international student sponsors (such as universities) on key metrics to ensure they effectively manage their students, focusing on low visa refusal rates (maximum 5%), high student enrollment (minimum 95%), and high course completion rates (minimum 90%).
British Universities' International Liaison Association (BUILA)	A professional association representing staff working in international recruitment, partnerships and marketing within UK higher education. It supports good practice, training and collaboration to enhance the UK's global engagement and international student experience.
Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)	An international standard describing language ability across six levels (A1–C2), used to compare qualifications and test results.
Construct validity	The extent to which a test accurately measures the theoretical trait or ability it is intended to assess. It is central to ensuring that test scores genuinely reflect the construct being evaluated rather than unrelated factors.
Course design	The systematic process of planning and organising a course's content, structure, learning activities and assessments to achieve specific educational goals and outcomes.
Critical thinking	The ability to analyse information objectively, evaluate evidence and arguments and make reasoned judgments. It involves questioning assumptions, recognising bias and applying logic to reach well-supported conclusions.
Degree outcomes	The final results achieved by students, typically expressed in degree classifications such as First, Upper Second, Lower Second, or Third Class.
Discipline	A distinct field of academic study or branch of knowledge with its own methods, theories, and conventions. It shapes how knowledge is produced, communicated and evaluated within a specific academic community.
Discourses and genres	Distinct forms and conventions of language use in academic and disciplinary contexts, such as essays, reports or research articles.
Discourse analysis	The study of how language is used in texts and contexts to construct meaning, relationships, and social realities. It examines patterns of communication beyond the sentence level, considering both linguistic features and the surrounding social or cultural context.
English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)	The use of English to teach academic subjects other than English itself, in contexts where English is not the primary language of the majority of learners.
English for Academic Purposes (EAP)	The teaching and learning of English aimed at developing the language and study skills needed for higher education contexts.

English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)	Language provision that focuses on communicative practices specific to a discipline.
English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)	Provision that typically focuses on generic skills such as essay writing or critical reading in a decontextualised manner.
English language proficiency	A person's ability to use English effectively across listening, speaking, reading and writing in academic and everyday contexts.
Fair access	'Fair access' refers to initiatives and policies designed to ensure that students from all backgrounds, particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, have equal opportunities to enter and succeed in higher education. It involves removing barriers to equitable participation and promoting diversity and inclusion.
Formative and summative assessments	Formative assessments provide ongoing feedback to support learning; summative assessments evaluate achievement at the end of a course or module.
Higher education providers	Universities and other institutions in the UK that deliver degree-level or equivalent qualifications and are recognised by UK regulatory bodies.
In-sessional English	English language and academic skills support offered during a student's main programme of study to aid success and integration.
Intercultural competence	The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures by understanding differences, recognising one's own cultural perspective and adapting behaviour with empathy, openness, curiosity and respect for others' values and beliefs.
Learner autonomy	The capacity of students to take responsibility for their own learning by setting goals, making choices, and evaluating their progress. It involves developing independence, self-regulation and the ability to learn beyond formal instruction.
Learning aims	Broad statements that describe the overall intentions or goals of a course or programme - what educators want students to understand, appreciate or achieve by the end of their learning experience.
Learning outcomes	Clear, measurable statements of what learners are expected to know, understand, or be able to do by the end of a course or programme, demonstrating achievement of the learning aims.
Mapping	The process of aligning and comparing English language tests or qualifications against recognised frameworks such as the CEFR or institutional requirements.
Medium of Instruction (MOI)	The language used to teach academic subjects and deliver instruction within an educational setting.

Needs analysis	The process of identifying learners' language, academic and professional requirements to design courses or materials that effectively meet their specific learning goals and contexts.
Overseas-domiciled students	Students whose permanent residence is outside the UK prior to beginning their studies at a UK institution.
Pathway programmes	Structured preparatory courses that combine academic subjects and English language development to support entry into UK degree programmes.
Practitioner in EAP	A professional who applies theory, pedagogy, and research to support students' development of academic English and study skills. They combine practical classroom expertise with reflective and evidence-informed practice to enhance learning outcomes.
Predictive validity	How well test scores forecast future performance, such as success in academic study.
Pre-sessional English	Short, intensive courses taken before the start of a degree to help students meet required English language levels and prepare for academic study.
Process and product in EAP assessment	Evaluation of both how students develop their academic skills (the process) and the final outcomes they produce (the product). This dual focus supports deeper learning, promotes academic integrity and helps identify and assist students who need support before high-stakes assessments.
Progression rate	The proportion of students who successfully move from one stage of study to the next within their programme.
Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)	The independent body that monitors and advises on standards and quality in UK higher education. It works with universities and colleges to ensure students receive a high-quality academic experience and that qualifications meet national expectations.
Quality assurance	The processes and systems used to ensure that academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are consistently maintained and meet agreed expectations.
Quality enhancement	The continuous improvement of learning and teaching, using evidence and feedback to innovate and raise standards beyond baseline requirements.
Reliability	The consistency and stability of test results across different times, versions or assessors.
Retention rate	The percentage of students who continue their studies rather than withdrawing before completion.

Scaffolding	The temporary support and guidance provided by a teacher to help learners perform tasks or understand concepts they could not manage independently. As learners gain confidence and ability, this support is gradually reduced to promote autonomy and mastery.
Secure English Language Test (SELT)	An approved English language exam required by the UK Home Office for certain visa and immigration applications. It is conducted under strict security conditions to ensure the reliability and authenticity of test results.
Subject area	A specific domain of study or teaching that falls within a broader academic discipline. It represents a focused field of knowledge, such as economics within the discipline of social sciences or linguistics within the discipline of humanities.
Teaching English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) qualification	A professional certification that recognises teachers' expertise in delivering English for Academic Purposes in higher education contexts. It assesses knowledge, skills and reflective practice specific to supporting students' academic language development.
Test security	Measures taken to protect test content and administration from misuse, fraud or compromise, ensuring results remain trustworthy.
UK-domiciled students	Students whose main residence is within the UK before starting higher education study.
UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI)	A division of the UK Home Office responsible for managing the country's visa system, immigration control and citizenship applications. It sets and enforces the rules for individuals seeking to study, work or live in the UK.
Universities UK International (UUKi)	The international arm of Universities UK, representing and supporting UK universities' global engagement. It works to enhance the UK's international education profile through policy advocacy, partnerships, and research on international mobility and collaboration.
Validity	The extent to which a test accurately measures what it is intended to measure.
Validation	The process of gathering evidence to confirm that a test or qualification is appropriate, fair and effective for its intended purpose.
Virtual learning environment (VLE)	An online platform that supports teaching and learning by providing access to course materials, communication tools, assessments and collaborative activities in a digital space.
Washback	The influence that testing has on teaching and learning, which can be either positive (improving learning) or negative (narrowing focus).