

Executive summary

This report explores international students' experiences of meeting English language requirements for UK higher education. It looks beyond English language evidence as a technical admissions requirement and considers how testing, alternative evidence routes, cost, access, clarity and preparation shape students' wider journey into UK study.

The project used a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey of approximately 750 respondents with qualitative focus groups involving international students from a range of countries, educational routes and institutional contexts. The findings should be read as reflecting the experiences and perceptions of respondents and participants in this study, rather than as a statistically representative sample of all international students. The survey sample included a high proportion of respondents who had taken the Duolingo English Test, so findings relating to online testing, test availability, speed of results and particular test formats should be interpreted in that context.

Key findings

English language testing is a common experience among respondents in this study, but students do not always experience the process as clear, consistent or easy to navigate. Students are aware that a wide range of English language tests and evidence routes exists, but uncertainty about which options are accepted by different universities can lead them to rely on a small number of well-known tests.

Students place high importance on tests and other evidence routes being widely accepted by universities and immigration authorities, affordable, readily available and quick to book, with results returned promptly. These practical factors can be particularly important when students are working towards tight application, offer or visa deadlines.

Cost can be a significant barrier, especially for students at the exploratory stage of deciding whether and where to apply. For some students, the upfront cost of an English language test can feel speculative if they are not yet confident that they will meet the required score, secure an offer or know whether that test will be accepted by their chosen institution.

Geography and test-centre access also matter. Participants described how travelling to test centres from rural areas, smaller cities or countries with limited test infrastructure can involve additional costs, travel time and logistical uncertainty. Remote or digitally accessible test-taking options can help reduce some of these barriers for some students, while recognising that students need different routes depending on their financial, geographical, technological and logistical circumstances.

Students' choice of English language test is not always an individual decision. It can be shaped by universities, departments, scholarship bodies, education agents, local institutions and perceptions of which tests are most widely accepted.

Some students from English-medium education systems, or who have qualifications delivered in English, reported frustration with inconsistent approaches to recognising prior study, employer evidence, interviews or UK transnational education qualifications as evidence of English language ability. These differences can appear unclear or difficult to understand from the student perspective, particularly where reasons are not clearly explained.

Some participants perceived elements of English language tests as stressful, formulaic or culturally unfamiliar. Speaking and writing were described as particularly challenging by some students from contexts where English is not widely used in daily life. Participants also noted that timed test conditions could affect their ability to demonstrate their English language skills confidently.

Meeting English language requirements is not the end point of student preparedness. Respondents and participants generally reported that English language tests helped them feel prepared to study in English, but some felt less prepared for UK academic conventions, independent learning, discipline-specific academic language, regional accents, humour, informal communication and everyday life in the UK.

Recommendations

1. UK universities should ensure that information on English language requirements is clear, prominent and consistently understood and communicated internally and externally, enabling students and their advisers to understand the full range of accepted tests and other forms of English language evidence.
2. UK universities and the wider sector should ensure that students have flexibility and choice in English language tests and evidence routes, supporting access and equity for students who have different financial, geographical, technological and logistical circumstances.
3. English language test providers should review test formats to minimise unnecessary format dependency and cultural unfamiliarity, while ensuring that tests continue to assess the language skills that students need for UK higher education.
4. UK universities should develop a shared cross-institutional understanding that meeting English language requirements is not the end point of student preparedness and ensure that academic and professional services staff are equipped to support international student communities.
5. UK universities should develop clearer and more consistent approaches to recognising prior English-medium education and qualifications from UK transnational education partnerships where these can appropriately evidence English language ability and where institutions are permitted to exercise such discretion.