

Introduction

IELTS celebrated 20 years of success in 2008 – a year in which the number of candidates taking the test rose to over 1.2 million in a 12-month period. Since it was first introduced in 1989, IELTS has remained at the cutting edge of communicative English language testing by drawing on the diverse strengths of its three partners: British Council, IELTS Australia and University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations.

While IELTS has benefited from two decades of progressive change, we have always maintained separate Academic and General Training modules and continue to use a face-to-face Speaking test as the most effective way of assessing communicative language skills. This has allowed us to meet the growing need for a test that is not only international in scope, but goes beyond knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to demonstrate an ability to use English effectively in real-life situations.

Whether people are looking for entry to higher education or seeking to live and work in an English-speaking country, IELTS has proved to be the dependable test for candidates, educational institutions, governments, professional bodies and commercial organisations.

The last 20 years have seen huge changes in language teaching, as well as a marked increase in the use of English as the international language of higher education. IELTS has been at the forefront of these changes and whatever challenges the next 20 years bring, we look forward to playing a major role.

IELTS history

Originally used for entry into higher education in the UK and Australia, the last two decades have seen IELTS grow into an English-language proficiency benchmark for education, employment and migration purposes. It is now accepted by over 6,000 organisations worldwide, allowing candidates to achieve their ambitions throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. Its increasing popularity in the US education sector was highlighted last year with the announcement that more than 2,000 US academic institutions – including all Ivy League schools – use the test for admissions purposes. In addition, IELTS can now be used for entry into almost all higher education institutions in Australia, UK, Ireland and New Zealand.

2008 saw the retirement of Anne-Marie Cooper as Director of IDP: IELTS Australia. Anne-Marie played a key role in the development of IELTS from the moment it was first introduced. Her contribution to the development of the

test, as well as the extremely high level of service to candidates and receiving organisations has been inestimable.

Growth

In 2008, the number of people taking IELTS over a 12-month period increased to over a million, making IELTS the world's most widely taken test of English for migration and higher education. This follows a pattern of steady growth over several years, with the number doubling since 2004. Candidate figures for 2009 look set to be even higher, driven by growing numbers of students coming to English-speaking countries for higher education, as well as the increasing internationalisation of labour markets.

The global IELTS network

The IELTS network continues to expand, with centres in many countries opening new venues and increasing their capacity. IELTS is now offered up to four times a month in over 125 countries, making it one of the most widely available English language tests in the world.

All centres receive direct support from British Council and IDP, as well as training in all aspects of test development.

The network has grown particularly rapidly in the United States, with the addition of 32 new centres in 2008, including our first centre in Hawaii. To support this growth, IELTS International, the organisation that represents IELTS in the USA, has taken on a new Marketing Manager and a Senior Product Champion, Andrea Scott, who is a very well known figure in US higher education.

Stakeholders

IELTS works closely with stakeholders throughout the language teaching profession, higher education, immigration authorities and other users of the test. We take every opportunity to meet with stakeholders to ensure IELTS remains truly fit for purpose.

In November IELTS hosted a half-day seminar in London for the medical profession to explain the ways in which the IELTS test can help UK medical authorities to process international registrations and recruit overseas staff.

During 2008 IELTS sponsored a number of major international education events. Among them were Going Global - the Education UK Partnership Event in the UK - the National Association of College Admission Counselling (NACAC) in the USA, the Australian International Education Conference and the premier New Zealand education conference, CLESOL

IELTS was proud to sponsor a key plenary at the 60th NAFSA: Association of International Educators Annual Conference in Washington DC, USA in May 2008.

Over 4,000 delegates attended the plenary session with Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone, whose book 'A Long Way Gone' about his own experiences has become a worldwide best-seller. In his inspiring talk, Beah spoke of the plight of children affected by war around the world and the importance of international education and exchange in fostering global understanding and peace.

The plenary was just one of the contributions IELTS made to this event - the largest NAFSA Annual Conference to date, with over 9,300 delegates from 113 countries. Beryl Meiron, Executive Director, IELTS International reported that in all, over 1000 people visited the IELTS stand over the three and a half days of the Conference. This included representatives of many of the 1,800 universities and colleges in the USA that recognise IELTS, and of 11 more institutions that confirmed during the event that they now formally recognise IELTS.

Security

IELTS test results are used for admission to universities, colleges and professions, as well as for immigration to English-speaking countries. For this reason it is essential to ensure the security of candidate results. We have a number of measures in place to safeguard against the falsification of results, making IELTS one of the most trusted and secure English language tests in the world.

Test Report Forms are printed on security-enhanced paper. They are authenticated by a centre stamp, an IELTS validation stamp and a photograph of the candidate.

All IELTS test centres are required to follow a detailed code of practice which ensures the highest standards of security throughout the testing process, from registration to the recording of results. Candidates must provide photographic evidence of identity when they register and on the day of the test. In addition, every IELTS test centre administrator is trained to the level of immigration officials in order to ensure they can detect impostors and fraudulent documents.

The authenticity of any Test Report Form (TRF) can be checked by using our free TRF Online Verification Service. This secure and easy-to-use feature is an invaluable tool for verifying test results

Recognition

Recognition of IELTS continued to expand during 2008, with over 6,000 institutions now recognising IELTS. Highlights include:

- Recognition within the UK's new points-based immigration system.
- In the USA, all Ivy League schools now accept IELTS scores from overseas applicants. Dartmouth College, located in Hanover, New Hampshire has also adopted IELTS for undergraduate admissions.
- The Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications was the first major university in the People's Republic of China to officially recognise IELTS. This was followed by the announcement that the East China University of Science and Technology has adopted IELTS for its MBA programme.

Test Development

IELTS remains committed to offering tests of the highest possible quality. This means that all aspects of the test, assessment processes and support systems are constantly being reviewed and updated to ensure IELTS remains fit for purpose.

In 2008, an enhancement of the General Training Reading paper was finalised. The new paper is designed to meet the needs of a wider range of candidates, particularly the increasing number of people who take IELTS for employment or immigration purposes.

From 1 May 2009, the General Training reading paper will focus more closely on a work context (applying for jobs, company policies, pay and conditions, workplace facilities, staff development, etc), making it more relevant to the needs of candidates looking to migrate to an English speaking country for work.

Research

IELTS is backed by an extensive programme of research, validation and test development which underpins the quality of the test. This programme includes academic research by the three IELTS partners and sponsorship of external researchers.

The following projects were awarded grant funding in 2008

Dr Lynda Yates Ms Elizabeth Pryor	Examiner use and views of the revised IELTS pronunciation descriptors
Glenys Merrifield	The use of IELTS for assessing immigration eligibility in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK
Kate Wilson Fiona Cotton	An investigation of examiner rating of coherence and cohesion in the IELTS Writing Task 2
R. Badger Y.Xiaobiao	To what extent does IELTS encourage communicative language teaching in Chinese IELTS classrooms?
Dr R. Breeze Dr P Miller	Predictive validity of the IELTS Listening test as an indicator of student coping ability in English-medium undergraduate courses in Spain
Professor P Seedhouse	Topic Development in the IELTS Speaking Test

Sharing findings

In 2008, we continued to provide a varied programme of presentations at numerous conferences, seminars and symposia around the world. In addition, the IELTS partners shared the latest research with the wider assessment community through various publications. These include:

IELTS Research Reports Volume 8.

Published by IELTS Australia, the eighth volume of this informative series looks at:

- An ethnographic study of classroom instruction in an IELTS preparation programme
- The significance of sociolinguistic backgrounds of teachers of IELTS test preparation courses in selected Malaysian institutions
- The use of IELTS for university selection in Australia
- Use of the IELTS General Training module in technical and vocational tertiary institutions in New Zealand
- An impact study into the use of IELTS as an entry criterion for professional associations in Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

Information on how to order IELTS Research Reports is available from

www.ielts.org

Assessing Academic English: Testing English proficiency 1950-1989 – the IELTS solution (Studies in Language Testing, volume 23)

By Alan Davies

An authoritative account of academic language proficiency testing in the UK, this volume includes;

- A coherent socio-cultural analysis of the changes in language testing and an explanation of why history matters as much in this field as elsewhere
- A comprehensive discussion of the significant factors which impact on test design and revision.
- Historical documents relating to the language tests discussed.

This volume will be of particular interest to language test developers and policy-makers, especially those keen to understand language tests within their historical and socio-cultural context.

Winner of the IELTS Masters Award 2008

Each year the IELTS partners sponsor an annual award of £1000 for the Masters level dissertation that makes the most significant contribution to the field of language testing. After careful consideration the Committee chose Susan Clarke of Macquarie University as the 2008 recipient. Susan studied at the Department of Linguistics and her supervisor was John Knox.

Susan's thesis, entitled 'Investigating interlocutor input and candidate response on the IELTS Speaking test: A Systematic Functional Linguistics Approach' offers a valuable insight into the relationship between interlocutor and candidate discourse and the implications for test reliability and validity.

Band score information

IELTS is assessed on a 9-band scale and reports scores both overall and by individual skill. Overall band scores for Academic and General Training candidates in 2008 are shown at

http://www.ielts.org/researchers/analysis_of_test_data.aspx, together with scores for individual skills according to a variety of classifications. These figures are broadly in line with statistics for previous years.