



# The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education Admissions Practices in the UK

Phase 1 of a UKALTA-sponsored project to investigate  
Higher Education Assessment Literacy (HEAL)  
in the UK context

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## CONTENTS

|                                                                                      |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Acknowledgement.....</b>                                                          | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Executive summary.....</b>                                                        | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>1. Overview of the research project .....</b>                                     | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>2. The interview.....</b>                                                         | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>3. Findings .....</b>                                                             | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>3.1 Pandemic responses.....</b>                                                   | <b>6</b>  |
| 3.1.1 Obtaining information about new/adapted tests .....                            | 6         |
| 3.1.2 Evaluating the suitability of new/adapted tests.....                           | 7         |
| 3.1.3 The pandemic's effect on university processes for test acceptance.....         | 8         |
| 3.1.4 Reporting concerns about test suitability .....                                | 9         |
| 3.1.5 New/alternative assessments were seen as temporary .....                       | 9         |
| 3.1.6 Pressure on the participants.....                                              | 10        |
| <b>3.2 Evaluating existing and new exams: procedures and wish lists .....</b>        | <b>10</b> |
| 3.2.1 Universities have regular review procedures.....                               | 10        |
| 3.2.2 Universities conduct 'benchmarking' exercises to compare and align exams ..... | 11        |
| 3.2.3 What could be done to help those doing the 'benchmarking'? .....               | 11        |
| 3.2.4 Tracking student progress .....                                                | 12        |
| <b>3.3 Changes that have occurred and going forward .....</b>                        | <b>13</b> |
| 3.3.1 What Covid has changed with regard to accepting assessments .....              | 13        |
| 3.3.2 Participants' thoughts on the future .....                                     | 13        |
| <b>4. Summary and conclusions.....</b>                                               | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Appendix A: Pre-interview stimulus questionnaire sent to participants .....</b>   | <b>15</b> |
| <b>Appendix B: Question protocol for the focus group facilitator .....</b>           | <b>17</b> |

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was commissioned by the Executive Committee of the UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment (UKALTA) to investigate important themes relating to the impact of Covid-19 on higher education admissions practices in the UK. The project employed a qualitative approach, collecting data through a group interview, hereafter referred to as the 'focus group', with selected representatives from UK Higher Education, all of whom are involved in university Admissions decisions for both Undergraduate (UGR) and Postgraduate (PGR) students.

The report's Findings are presented in three parts. The first part considers how the participants and their institutions responded to the challenges of international recruitment brought about by the pandemic, while the second part discusses findings related to the institutions' general procedures for evaluating tests. In the third part, the lessons learnt are presented along with the participants' opinions regarding how the future might look at their institution, and we outline some areas in which UKALTA could provide support to university admissions staff in the future.

The findings suggest that, in response to the developing pandemic, universities in the UK decided to accept new tests as part of their Admissions procedures as a way of safeguarding their ability to recruit international students and avoid a drop in student numbers. In doing so, they consulted with, and were variously approached by, a number of organisations including the test providers and competitor and benchmark academic institutions, with some universities investigating the suitability of the tests by requiring applicants to also take an internal test as a control measure. To assess the suitability of the new tests, Admissions staff considered aspects such as the availability of the test, test security and remote proctoring, and the content and proficiency levels of each test to ensure that these met their institution's and the government's requirements. Despite going to some lengths to ensure that the tests were suitable for use during the ongoing pandemic, there was a feeling that these new approaches were only temporary, and the ongoing acceptance of these assessments would need to be reviewed to see whether they are appropriate for such high-stakes decisions in the longer term.

To facilitate the benchmarking of tests, participants said that they would benefit from knowing not just what CEFR level(s) a test targets but what a given score on a test means in comparison to the IELTS test. They would also appreciate knowing more about school exams around the world and would welcome assistance in making judgements about whether a student has the academic literacy to succeed in a university programme. Some participants stated that they are also able to track a student's progress through a course, connecting this back to the specific English exams they had taken, and that this would help them to decide whether an applicant's language proficiency was adequate; other participants expressed a desire to do this but stated that they were not in a position to do so at present. Finally, participants felt that, in the future, online tests may be accepted if students who have entered the university with those tests succeed but institutions may also consider developing their own tests.

Whilst the report captures the experiences, rationales, decisions and predictions of the participants, we do add the caveat that the focus group was comprised of just four participants, albeit experienced officers from four differing institutions, and the findings presented in this report are not intended to be representative of the experiences of all Admissions staff in all higher education institutions across the UK. However, whilst the participant numbers for this investigation are small, we have good reason to suspect, given rich and extensive interview data collected, including a wide range of issues raised by the participants themselves, that if such focus groups were to be repeated with other Admissions staff, the themes arising, decisions faced and actions reported would be largely the same.

We hope that this report is able to furnish the reader with a university-led view of what happened during Covid in relation to English language exams and university Admissions, and trust that the information contained in this report could form the basis of a more in-depth quantitative research study across a wider population of Admissions staff in the future.

*To facilitate the benchmarking of tests, participants said that they would benefit from knowing not just what CEFR level(s) a test targets but what a given score on a test means in comparison to the IELTS test. They would also appreciate knowing more about school exams around the world.*

## 1. OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The HEAL Task Force was set up in 2019 with the aim of assisting university Admissions staff with issues around assessment literacy, the comparison of language assessments and what to consider when evaluating new assessments. The Steering Committee at the time of writing comprises: Dr Carolyn Westbrook, Dr Mark Griffiths, Dr Elaine Boyd, Diane Schmitt and Anthony Keeble.

In October 2020, the authors of this report entered into discussions with the UKALTA Executive Committee regarding HEAL's intended research aims, and also in light of the Covid pandemic that had gripped the world shortly after the establishment of the HEAL Task Force, the potential for conducting research to investigate new lines of enquiry regarding how the pandemic had affected the original issues identified. The intended outcome of this research would be to inform UKALTA how it may offer assistance to UK Admissions Officers in the future.

The HEAL Task Force Steering Committee met to create input for a group interview with Admissions Officers, setting out suggested lines of enquiry. The authors of this report then created a pre-interview questionnaire, which was sent out to participants to stimulate their thoughts and promote discussion in the group interview. There was a strong focus in the questionnaire on the impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education admissions in the UK. A copy of this questionnaire is included in Appendices of this report.

## 2. THE INTERVIEW

The focus group interview was held in December 2020, and the authors subsequently analysed the nearly two hours of interview data collected. The participants were recruited by emailing members of the wider HEAL Task Force and requesting their assistance in inviting Admissions staff from their institutions to participate in the focus group. Participants should be staff who were charged with advising and deciding on which English language assessments to accept in their university. Members of the wider HEAL Task Force were also invited to attend if this pre-requisite applied to them. This resulted in the four participants from four different institutions volunteering to take part: one Language Assessor, one Postgraduate Admissions Manager, a Director of Academic Development and Training for International Students, and an Education Policy Development Manager. Since a face-to-face meeting was not possible due to Covid restrictions, the researchers provided a professional Zoom account on which the focus group could take place.

The lines of enquiry created by the HEAL Task Force Steering Committee fed into the pre-interview questionnaire and the interview facilitator (Mark Griffiths) used these lines of enquiry and the topics in the pre-interview questionnaire to create questions and discussion stimulus points focused around the themes in the questionnaire, which can be found in Appendix B of this report.

As co-researcher, Carolyn Westbrook opened the focus group, assured participants that responses would be anonymous and explained how the interview was going to be conducted: the facilitator would lead the interview and the co-researcher would take notes but would also pose questions if any clarification or further detail was needed. The interview was recorded for analysis purposes and all participants consented to being recorded; they were also made aware that they could access their interview recording and data through the researchers at their request.

The interview was then transcribed and the notes taken were used for the analysis. In the initial phase, the extensive notes taken were used to identify the broad themes that emerged and then the transcription was coded using NVivo to identify the themes and comments relating to those themes in more detail. As a result, the analysed interview data presented in this report are grouped together into themes rather than being presented in the chronological order of the interview questions.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 Pandemic responses

#### 3.1.1 Obtaining information about new/adapted tests

At the start of the outbreak, when alternative or adapted assessments were being offered by test providers, the participants set about obtaining information regarding the tests and their contents. They also sought sufficient reassurance that the new or adapted assessments were acceptable and secure. To achieve this, a range of sources was drawn upon and processes initiated. Those sources and processes mentioned by the focus group participants are listed below.

- One participant made a visit to an exam provider in the US (Duolingo). Visitors to Duolingo were given reassurance about the test content and remote proctoring and were given a chance to take the test themselves.
- Test providers (TOEFL and IELTS were mentioned) gave webinars that guests could attend. These explained how analogue test qualities were preserved, but digitally delivered.

- Participants consulted with, and sought the views of:
  - peers/colleagues in other universities
  - their university's own English Language Centre
  - their university faculties
  - their university's International Office, hoping they could provide insight into what the students abroad were saying regarding current tests and possible tests.
- One university directly asked Cambridge Assessment for a view.
- Participants conducted an internal benchmarking exercise, comparing new tests against the CEFR and IELTS.
- Some universities that had an internal English language assessment in place expanded their internal assessment programme to, for example:
  - double test the first 100 students taking TOEFL Home Edition
  - extend existing English language testing for postgraduate applications to undergraduate applicants.

### 3.1.2 Evaluating the suitability of new/adapted tests

The assessment alternatives offered by test providers were evaluated according to a number of different factors. The participants referred to the following questions.

- Questions on content:
  - Does the test have detailed information on each skill component for UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI) purposes?
  - Is the test sufficiently academic? The test must in no way compromise the secure Highly Trusted Sponsor status for Category 4 UKVI.
- Questions on availability/accessibility:
  - Is the test available in China?
  - Is the test accessible to students who currently can't access test centres due to local lockdowns?
- Questions on test security:
  - Does the test offer remote proctoring and how thorough is it?  
For example, does it prevent the opening of other tabs and browsers?  
Can it sense when a student looks away for a long time?

- Questions on language proficiency levels:
  - Does the test meet the university entry requirements? Can this be evidenced?
  - A lack of evidence and no remote proctoring were significant obstacles to tests being accepted. On this basis, it was not until July 2020 that IELTS Indicator and TOEFL Home Edition were accepted, when satisfactory remote proctoring was in place.

### 3.1.3 The pandemic's effect on university processes for test acceptance

University processes and decisions regarding the acceptance of assessments were affected by the pandemic, and participants drew contrasts between pre- and during pandemic contexts.

- In pre-Covid times, one participant could make recommendations regarding English Language (EL) tests, drawing on the combined views of:
  - students, either directly or through colleges (e.g. the university's collegiate system)
  - international teams, requesting information about the recognition of local, in-country qualifications
  - colleagues in the university English language teaching centres
  - admissions officers
  - colleagues working in compliance.
- However, during Covid:
  - One participant reported that: "Procedures may not have changed significantly, but this year, they became more intense".
  - Other participants reported how universities convened some kind of EL working group to review the situation and pass advice on to the university.
  - "Papers advising on EL tests got diverted to university leaders. Ordinarily, it's a stakeholder discussion piece, canvassing opinions from different stakeholders."
  - The university then decided what to do. There was "a restructuring of who calls the shots" with "some decisions [being] made by people who might not usually make decisions about EL tests".
  - "It became more about university strategy: 'This is where we need to be – how are we going to get there?'"

### 3.1.4 Reporting concerns about test suitability

Participants reported that they had concerns about the suitability of tests but remarked on their lack of impact on the system:

- If the test was seen by the participants as not working or not robust enough, the participants reported that they were largely unable to do anything about it themselves, because:
  - Universities are keen not to lose a candidate on the basis of an English test not being sufficiently robust.
  - “There is a strong feeling at university decision-making level of ‘this competitor university accepts the test, so why don’t we?’”
  - “It can be difficult to write to the university to say, ‘this test isn’t good enough’.”

### 3.1.5 New/alternative assessments were seen as temporary

Participants stated that they had taken a view on the length of acceptability of new/alternative assessments:

- Where new tests, or tests delivered by new digital means, were accepted, acceptance was seen as an interim solution, “as part of business continuity”. Participants saw this as a “stop gap” temporary situation, and one that would be reviewed the following year. (“Reviewing of assessments is standard practice anyway, so this would fall into part of the annual or regular cycle.”)
- Because the TOEFL Home Edition and IELTS Indicator exams had been badged as temporary, the universities were given to understand that the exams would be removed from the market at the end of the pandemic.
- One participant reported that it is not uncommon with new tests to “have it for a year and see how it feels”. There would be research to follow, to see what outcomes there were from accepting these tests, but at the point of this focus group interview, it was too early to pre-empt what the outcome would be.

### 3.1.6 Pressure on the participants

The participants felt additional pressure during the first stages of the pandemic

- Participants did not report feeling explicit pressure from EL test providers, although one organisation was described as “not as the loudest voice in the room but certainly the most persistent”.
- Participants reported feeling pressure in the form of having to ensure that current and applicant students had access to some kind of EL test. Their actions included:
  - widening the internal criteria for taking an internal assessment in place of the usual test, ensuring that those who needed a test still had access to one
  - revising internal policies and expanding assessment to include undergraduate students. (Internal English language assessments are normally taken by postgraduate students.)
- Participants reported wanting to avoid the students not being able to take up a place just because they couldn't get a test. There was a feeling that the students “should not be disadvantaged by something that was beyond their control”.
- The lack of accessibility to tests in China brought pressure.
- There was a feeling that universities didn't want to “lose students”.
- Admissions staff felt pressure to make decisions and recommendations quickly.
- Participants reported feeling pressure to do a deeper review of entry requirements to their respective universities.

## 3.2 Evaluating existing and new exams: procedures and wish lists

### 3.2.1 Universities have regular review procedures

- Universities check comparator and competitor institutions to see what they are accepting. They check to ensure that they are not out of sync with the market.
- Participants reported that Admissions and/or EL staff check to see if a given test is truly a test of academic English. However, it was not clear if staff were trained to look for or analyse constructs in a given test, or the extent to which the construct of academic English was represented.

*Admissions staff felt pressure to make decisions  
and recommendations quickly.*

## 3.2.2 Universities conduct 'benchmarking' exercises to compare and align exams

- Universities conduct 'benchmarking' exercises to compare and align exams using several different processes and comparisons.
- They check the accepted grades for EL exams to see how they align against other universities. This is mostly focused on applications for PGR courses, as around 70% of postgrads are international in contrast to 20% of UGR being international students.
- However, they do not make decisions based solely on competitor institutions. Benchmarking can also mean checking:
  - School qualifications for undergraduates and how they align with EL qualifications. The focus group participants are often the ones asked to review them.
  - Other universities' equivalences
  - Information provided by test providers
  - "We do our own assessment to make sure that things look ok."
  - Examination documentation and samples
  - How scores can be mapped against other tests, e.g. IELTS.
  - Is the test mappable to the CEFR?
  - "Statistics"

## 3.2.3 What could be done to help those doing the 'benchmarking'?

- Participants stated that "rightly or wrongly", they wanted to know what the test scores meant in terms of IELTS. They want mapping: skill-by-skill, component-by-component. "What does a component of Test A mean in IELTS-speak?"
- They would like to be provided with specific scores, not just lists of what is being tested.
- They would greatly appreciate content and scoring information about school exams, e.g. iGCSE, from around the world.
- One participant stated that whilst the UKVI requirements are important, it would be good to be able to make a judgement of the suitability of the student that includes an evaluation of their academic literacy.
- There was a request for assistance in making judgements regarding whether a student will be able to cope with the language, whether they are well-equipped and what procedures the university might need to put in place to ensure they can cope.

- There was common agreement that a previous BALEAP document from a few years back and recently updated, *BALEAP Guidelines on English Language Tests for University Entrance*<sup>1</sup> (BALEAP, 2021), which was independent and compiled from a university perspective, was very helpful. It compared the content of exams, which skills were tested, and proficiency levels. More of this was very much desired.
- One participant stated that they recognised the CEFR is “just a set of measurement descriptors, not academic achievement scales”. It is not clear how widespread this view is beyond the participants in the interview. It might help to broadcast this message more widely.

### 3.2.4 Tracking student progress

The option to track students’ progress, connecting the English test they took and subsequent academic success, varies from university to university:

- One university department has a system that allows them to track the student by the English exam taken through their entire course to see if their language was good enough.
- One respondent reported that at their university there was a project that attempted something along these lines and found a strong correlation between good performance on the Writing components of English tests and degree success.
- In one university, which only accepts two tests, TOEFL and IELTS, there is no official system that tracks a student back to a single test. However, they do monitor performance to check where a student may not be as strong as they had appeared to be.
- Another participant stated, in reference to a tracking system: “I dream of that”. They stated that it would be good to have a system that monitored students’ progress on a number of factors, not just English language.

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<sup>1</sup> BALEAP (2021). *BALEAP Guidelines on English Language Tests for University Entrance*. Retrieved from: <https://www.baleap.org/resources/baleap-publications>. Accessed 01 Oct 2021.

### 3.3 Changes that have occurred and going forward

#### 3.3.1 What Covid has changed with regard to accepting assessments

- Participants shared the sentiment that without the pandemic, online tests would not have been accepted and it has opened their eyes to new alternatives in testing English:
  - “We have become more open to online testing and remote proctoring. Previously, we would not have considered any of the online tests at all.”
  - “Covid opened up doors and shone a light onto things that possibly should have been reviewed more often.”
  - One university is now looking at diversified models of assessment as part of its degree programme, considering not only how learning is to be delivered, but also how it is assessed.

#### 3.3.2 Participants’ thoughts on the future

- The impact of the pandemic has clearly made Admissions staff and their institutions rethink English language assessment for university entrance. While institutions have opened to new alternatives, they recognise that there needs to be more clarity regarding how decisions are made.
  - “We need to make sure it’s clearer how stakeholders feed into decisions about EL tests. This will make them more accountable and able to come up with decisions. This will enable people to act more swiftly in future.”
- There was also a feeling that the use of online tests and alternative tests may become more widespread in the future.
  - “We will check to see if students went on to do well in their degrees. If so, we might be more open to online tests in the future.”
  - “We may develop our own internal language test.”
  - “We need to be open to technology and ready for anything.”

*Participants shared the sentiment that without the pandemic, online tests would not have been accepted and it has opened their eyes to new alternatives in testing English.*

## 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This report has outlined the key themes emerging from the focus group interview with Admissions staff carried out in December 2020.

In summary, the research revealed how the pandemic had a significant impact on university admissions procedures, leading to changes in the types of tests accepted by institutions, particularly as existing assessments were adapted for digital delivery and new forms of assessments were developed. Whether institutions will continue to accept the assessments adapted and developed during the pandemic will likely, according to the participants in this study, depend on:

- how successful current students are in their studies
- whether the tests continue to be offered by the testing agencies and accepted by competitor and benchmark institutions.

*The pandemic had a significant impact on university admissions procedures, leading to changes in the types of tests accepted by institutions, particularly as existing assessments were adapted for digital delivery and new forms of assessments were developed.*

For future decision-making purposes, our interviewees reported that they would like to be able to compare the scores of lesser-known tests with scores on IELTS, and they would appreciate knowing more about school exams around the world and the levels of proficiency required in such tests.

To conclude, this study broadly identified two major impacts of the pandemic on universities with regard to language tests. First is the expedited acceptance of digitally administered tests. This has happened at a pace and through channels never previously seen. Second is the coming of digital language assessments: be they internally developed by institutions themselves or provided by external agencies; be they digitally administered versions of traditional tests or ground-up developed assessments of digital language skills.

Our findings indicate that digital language assessments are likely set to become a permanent feature of student admissions processes to universities in a post-pandemic United Kingdom.

## APPENDIX A: PRE-INTERVIEW STIMULUS QUESTIONNAIRE SENT TO PARTICIPANTS

### NUMBERS OF STUDENTS

Thinking about numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate international students who have applied to your institution, has Covid affected the numbers of:

- undergraduate students coming to your institution? Y/N
- postgraduate students coming to your institution? Y/N

- Who is there more of?
- Who is there less of?
- Is anything unchanged?

Has Covid affected the numbers of students being accepted to your institution? Y/N

- Who is there more of?
- Who is there less of?
- Is anything unchanged?

### ENTRANCE QUALIFICATIONS

Has your institution decided to accept different English language entrance qualifications?  
Which ones?

Why do you think these new qualifications were accepted in your particular institution? (tick as many as you want)

- A direct result of Covid
- Institutional/management decisions
- A new language test was available
- An existing language test more became relevant
- Convenience: a test could be taken/delivered conveniently
- Pressure to maintain student numbers
- Pressure to increase student numbers
- Pressure from students applying
- Aligning with competitor institutions
- Other

Do you plan to continue accepting these qualifications?

## **LANGUAGE EXPERTS**

Do you have a language expert/language committee that helps you decide which language tests/qualifications to accept?

## **ADDITIONAL TESTS**

Have you given/are you giving/do you intend to give students any additional language tests to measure their language skills before starting their courses?

Do you plan to continue giving these additional tests?

## **ADDITIONAL SUPPORT**

Did you/are you providing any additional EAP support to students presenting with 'new' qualifications?

Do you plan to continue providing this additional support?

## **INFORMATION SOURCES**

Do you know which information sources were consulted in making the decisions?

## **APPENDIX B: QUESTION PROTOCOL FOR THE FOCUS GROUP FACILITATOR**

### **ABOUT THE LANGUAGE TESTS**

Is there anything you think should or shouldn't have happened in relation to the English language tests accepted/not accepted in your institution?

### **FEEDBACK FROM ACADEMIC STAFF**

Has there been any feedback from academic staff regarding the level of English this academic year (keeping in mind any changes caused by Covid)?

- Is it different from any other years?

If issues arise in course delivery, do you get feedback?

- If so, what sort of feedback?

- Does that impact on future decisions (e.g. continuing (or not) to accept a given test)?

### **SUPPORTING YOUR DECISIONS**

Do you feel you have enough support for the decisions that have been made? What does it look like?

- Decisions that you've made

- Decisions that others have made that you've had to respond to

### **VALUE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTS ACCEPTED**

Have you had or heard of any complaints from students related to the value or validity of the English language tests your institution has accepted?

### **OVERALL...**

What have you learned from the 'Covid experience' that might inform future decision-making?

Would you like things to go back to the way they were? And if so / not, which bits and why?

If you could turn back the clock, which bits would you retain and what would you keep from what you have learnt?

## **PRESSURE**

Are there additional pressures that are arising (now you have 'bums on seats')?

And is this fed back? If so, does it affect decisions? (Thinking about this as a process and having an evaluation element to it.)

Which are the internal/external pressures? What are the pressures they should do? And what are they trying to avoid doing?

## **PREPAREDNESS FOR DISASTER**

To what extent do you feel you were well-prepared to respond to the challenges of the current situation? (Goes back to if there is a process in place and whether it is robust.)

## **HELP FROM HEAL IN THE FUTURE**

Given everything that we have discussed today, what help do you think you might require/how could we be helpful to you?

- What challenges do you still face/are you going to face that HEAL might be able to help/offer support with?