

International students' experiences meeting English language requirements

A UKCISA research report on access, choice and
preparedness in evidencing English language ability

Acknowledgements

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UKCISA is a membership organisation that works to support international students and the institutions, students' unions and organisations that work closely with them.

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Foreword

English language requirements are often discussed as a technicality of university admissions: a matter of tests, scores, compliance and institutional standards. These are, of course, important. Universities need confidence that students are able to participate in and succeed through their studies, and students need clarity about what is expected of them.

However, this report asks us to look beyond the requirement itself, and to ensure that debates about English language requirements do not lose sight of the students who experience them. For many international students, evidencing English language ability is not simply an administrative step. It shapes access, confidence, preparedness and the wider journey into UK higher education. It affects when and to where a student applies, how much they and their families must spend, how prepared they feel before arrival, and how they experience their first weeks and months in the UK.

At UKCISA, we believe that international students should be understood as individuals with different backgrounds, identities and ambitions – not simply as applicants, visa holders or data points. The *#WeAreInternational Student Charter* reminds us that international students represent a diverse body of people from different cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic, religious, ideological and political backgrounds, as well as those with different migratory experiences. That diversity should be celebrated. It should never put at risk a student's safety, dignity or overall experience.

That principle matters deeply in current debates about English language testing, student preparedness and international student recruitment. These conversations can too easily become abstract, or can focus only on systems, risk, standards, institutional pressure or public commentary. This research brings the focus back to students: their choices, their barriers, their frustrations and their hopes. It reminds us that English language requirements sit within a much broader experience of aspiration, transition and belonging.

As a former international student, I know that the journey into UK education can be life-changing. It was for me, as it has been for millions of students who have come to the UK to study, grow and contribute. But life-changing opportunities are not experienced equally. Students arrive with different levels of access to information, advice, financial resources, prior educational opportunities and familiarity with UK academic culture.

Recognising those differences is not about lowering expectations or standards. It is about ensuring that expectations and requirements are clear, fair and supported.

This report therefore does not argue for one single route, provider or model of English language evidence. Instead, it asks institutions, policymakers and the wider sector to listen carefully to international students' experiences. It invites us to consider how English language requirements can be rigorous while also being

accessible; how admissions processes can be clear while also recognising diverse educational backgrounds; and how students can be better supported not only to meet entry requirements, but to thrive once they arrive.

I hope this report supports a more balanced and student-centred conversation about English language requirements in UK higher education. Most importantly, I hope it reminds us that behind every application, every test result and every policy decision is a student making one of the most significant journeys of their life.

Yinbo Yu

Head of Engagement and Partnerships
UKCISA

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.**

1. Introduction

Across the UK higher education sector, there is increasing scrutiny of and discussion about the English language tests and requirements for international students and their English language proficiency and preparedness for study.

Current discussions largely focus on:

- the English proficiency of international students in the classroom
- the academic validity and reliability of English language tests
- the institutional responsibilities for setting and monitoring entry standards

While these are important debates, the perspectives of international students themselves remain underrepresented. For many students, evidencing English language ability is not a discrete admissions requirement but part of a wider journey involving expectations-setting, confidence-building, financial and logistical barriers, and transition into new academic environments.

This project aims to rebalance the conversation by centring international students' lived experience of English language testing and situating English language requirements within the broader journey into UK higher education, reflecting the principles of UKCISA's *#WeAreInternational Student Charter*¹.

This research seeks to understand how international students develop and evidence English language proficiency, and their preparedness for study and life in the UK, ensuring that any informed discussion of English language testing adequately captures the international student perspective.

¹ <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/media/bxobg5iu/weareinternational-student-charter.pdf>

2. Background

When international students apply to come and study in the UK, their English language ability must be assessed in order to apply for a Student visa. There are a variety of permitted ways a student can evidence their English language ability. Many students will be required to take a Home Office-approved secure English language test (SELT) and show they meet the required level. There are currently five government-approved test providers that offer SELTs to evidence English language ability for immigration purposes: IELTS SELT Consortium, LanguageCert, Pearson, PSI Services (UK) Ltd (Skills for English UKVI), and Trinity College London. Universities with the required UKVI sponsor status are able to assess the English language ability of students coming to study at degree level or above, and can also accept a wide range of non-SELT tests.

For degree-level study, universities with the required UKVI sponsor status are currently able to assess English themselves or accept a wide range of non-SELT tests. There are a large number of English language tests available on the market, and Lee *et al.* (2026) note that “the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the transformation of test delivery and [...] remote testing (also known as ‘online’ or ‘at home’ testing) has evolved into a standard delivery option.”

A survey of UKVI sponsors by the Home Office (2026) found that “SELTs were an accepted method of assessment for almost all HEPs [higher education providers] (99%), with the vast majority also accepting non-SELTs (92%), international English subject qualifications (93%) and degrees conducted in English (92%). They were slightly less likely to accept Local English subject qualifications (83%), Pre-sessional English courses/pathway programmes (78%), and high school/college level diplomas conducted in English (33%). Over one third (35%) provided in-house English language testing.”

Initially, it appears that a wider range of English language tests and evidence routes provides greater choice for students. However, students must navigate a potentially confusing mix of unfamiliar SELTs, university-approved academic tests, alternative evidence routes and institution-specific assessments. Requirements vary widely between universities, and even between courses within the same institution.

This complexity matters because English language requirements are not only an admissions or compliance issue. They can affect students’ confidence, costs, application timelines, preparedness and transition into UK higher education.

Research suggests that students who experience difficulties with academic language may face barriers to academic engagement, social integration and overall satisfaction with their studies. Russell *et al.* (2022) found that international students’ academic language experiences were closely connected to their academic participation, confidence and satisfaction.

To date, there remains limited student-centred evidence on how international students experience English language testing and other evidence routes. This limits the extent to which current research and policy discussions are informed by the perspectives of students themselves.

3. Project purpose

This project places the voice of international students at the centre of the evolving debate over the future of English language testing for UK university admission. Building on the existing research and policy debate, and responding to the need for more student-centred evidence, the project is aligned with UKCISA's mission to inform, advise and support international students and the institutions, students' unions and organisations that work with them, and with its wider vision of ensuring that international students have a positive experience in the UK. It focuses on how international students experience evidencing English language ability for UK study and how these experiences shape their preparedness for academic study and their transition into UK higher education.

Specifically, this research situates English language requirements within the wider student journey, including how expectations of academic study and its language demands are communicated to and understood by international students prior to arrival, perceptions of their readiness on entry, and the interaction between language evidence pathways and institutional teaching, induction and academic support environments.

By broadening the lens beyond access to English language evidence, the study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of how language requirements, institutional practices and student support mechanisms collectively influence student readiness, experience and early outcomes in UK higher education.

4. Research objectives

- Map and understand how international students experience evidencing English language ability in practice.
- Explore how experiences differ across countries, socio-economic backgrounds, education routes and personal circumstances.
- Identify systemic barriers (financial, geographic, political, technological and documentation-related) that affect students' ability to meet English language requirements.
- Examine how different pathways to evidencing English language ability (test-centre exams, digital tests, EMI [English Medium Instruction] and school credentials) shape students' expectations of academic study, confidence and perceived preparedness on arrival.
- Explore international students' perceptions of their preparedness for UK higher education, including their understanding of academic language demands, teaching styles, assessment methods and participation expectations.
- Understand students' early transition experiences and how language-related challenges are experienced alongside induction, teaching practices, assessment design and academic support provision.
- Examine the role of institutional practices, including induction, academic skills support and teaching and learning environments, in supporting or constraining student preparedness.
- Assess the comparative cost burden of different English language evidence pathways relative to local incomes and the wider costs of the application journey.
- Generate insights from students for institutions and policy makers to help support student preparedness.

5. Research design and limitations

The project uses a mixed-methods approach, with two interrelated strands.

Strand 1: Global survey

This consisted of a quantitative survey of international students to capture:

- the importance of non-testing options to access (for example, high school credentials/EMI)
- students' awareness of English language test options
- the ease or difficulty of accessing test centres or online alternatives
- the cost of testing: fees, travel and documentation challenges
- students' overall perceptions of fairness and accessibility
- the extent to which different pathways to evidencing English language ability influence the competitiveness of university admissions – for example, high school/EMI or test centre vs. online tests
- students' expectation of study and perceived preparedness
- students' early post-enrolment experience, including transitions and onboarding into study (for enrolled students)

Target outcome: A data-driven baseline for how different groups experience the process

Strand 2: Qualitative research

This was carried out by a series of qualitative focus groups to explore distinct perspectives, for example, those of:

- students from countries or education systems where English is an official language or medium of instruction, but who are still required to take English language tests
- refugee and displaced students navigating instability or documentation barriers
- students in fragile or sanctioned states
- students from underserved regions (for example, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, British overseas territories)
- students in non-metropolitan areas (for example, secondary cities in India or China)
- students who opt not to study abroad, to explore whether English language testing played a role in that decision
- students applying to different course levels (for example, undergraduate, postgraduate or MBA) or students applying to different subjects
- students in the early stages of UK study

Target outcome: Qualitative insight into the diversity of international student experiences, their expectations and their transition challenges

Quotations from focus group participants have been lightly edited for clarity and readability, including the removal of filler words, false starts and repetition. These edits do not change the meaning or substance of participants' comments.

Anonymised student profiles are included throughout the report as illustrative vignettes drawn from the qualitative research. They are not intended to constitute a separate methodological strand or to be representative of all international students, but are used to show how different themes in the research can intersect in individual students' journeys.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The quantitative survey was conducted over a relatively short period of three weeks, and the sample size of approximately 750 should be understood in the context of 685,000 international students studying in UK universities (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] data for 2024–25). The survey was promoted through UKCISA's network and social media channels and was completed by students who chose to respond. As such, the findings should not be read as statistically representative of the wider international student population.

The sample also included a high proportion of respondents who had taken the Duolingo English Test. This means that findings related to online testing, test availability, speed of results and students' experience of particular test formats should be interpreted as reflecting the composition of this sample, rather than as evidence of the overall distribution of English language test use among international students applying to UK higher education.

Focus group participants also volunteered to take part in response to open invitations circulated by UKCISA and may have stronger opinions of English language tests, both positive and negative, than the international student population at large. With these caveats in mind, the results usefully bring the international student voice into the conversation about English language testing, evidence routes, preparedness and transition into UK higher education.

6. Results

The quantitative survey was prepared using SurveyMonkey and promoted by UKCISA through social media, including LinkedIn and Instagram, and direct email to students and to members, asking them to share the survey with their international students. The survey was live from 30 April until 20 May 2026 and attracted around 750 respondents. (Note: the precise number of respondents varies by question as not all questions apply to all respondents).

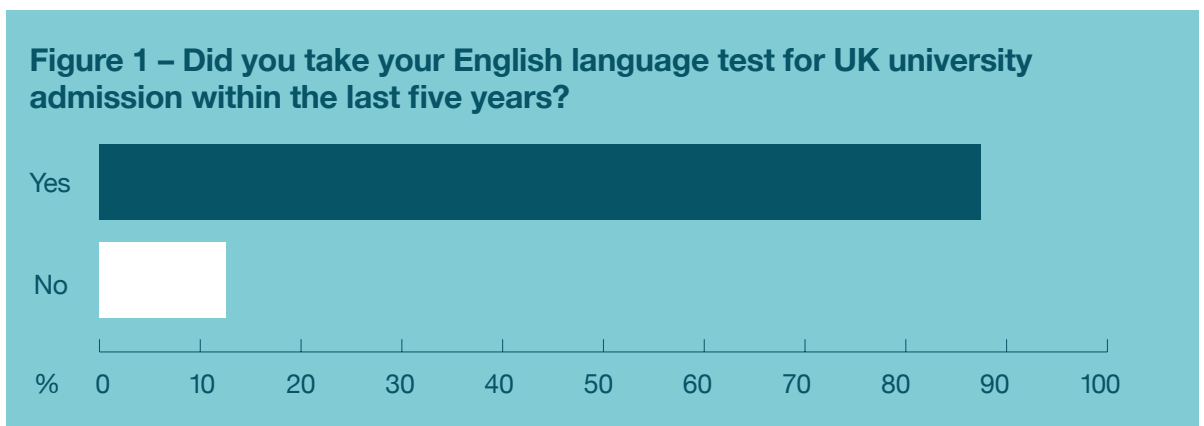
UKCISA invited international students to join the focus groups. The target number of participants in each focus group was six students. The focus groups were oversubscribed, and the final list of students selected was chosen to reflect the widest range of home countries and ensure a reasonable balance between undergraduate and postgraduate students and between different types of universities (for example, Russell Group, University Alliance, MillionPlus).

Focus groups 1 and 2 involved students from a range of countries, levels of study and institutions. Focus group 3 involved students from fragile or sanctioned states and underserved regions, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa. Focus group 4 involved students from non-metropolitan areas in India.

In the sections that follow, the survey results are presented and then analysed using insights from both the focus groups and, in a small number of cases, free text responses from survey participants. The student profiles were selected to illustrate the diversity of international students using English language tests to gain admission to UK universities.

Validity of English language tests

- a. In response to the question, **Did you take your English language test for UK university admission within the last five years?**, 87% of respondents (N=733) had taken a test within this period (Figure 1).



The focus groups revealed frustration with the short validity period of English language tests, which often required students to renew their results. One student from Kenya argued, **“The fact that it only lasts you two years is frustrating. Once I have proved that I can speak a language, my ability to speak that language does not simply expire after two years.”**

Another student from India added, **“I took an IELTS exam about five years ago, but the university said, ‘We need a recent one, so we cannot recognise it.’ That was quite disappointing because I had to take the test again.”**

Key messages

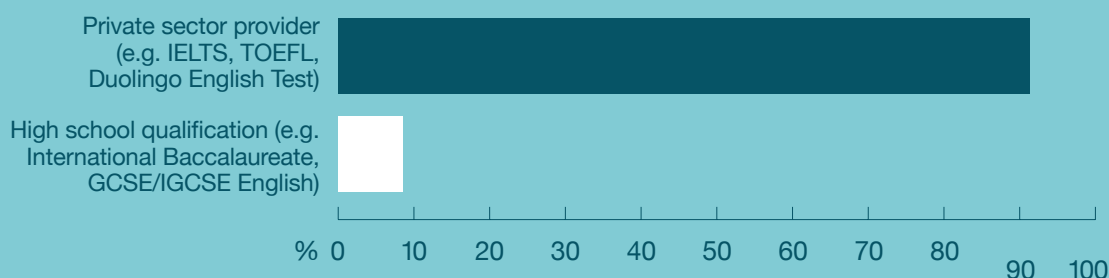
The majority of international students in this study had taken a formal standalone English language test to apply for university in the UK.

Students from countries where English is the medium of instruction in education or where they have time-expired English language tests express frustration with the inflexibility of the current system.

Evidencing English language ability

- b. When asked **Which type of test of your English language ability did you use to apply for university in the UK?** 91% of respondents (N=623) had used a private sector provider rather than relying on a high school qualification (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Which type of test of your English language ability did you use to apply for university in the UK?



English as a medium of instruction

For students studying in countries where English is mainly or widely used as a medium of instruction, the focus groups revealed that some applicants had been able to use interviews or a letter from an employer to satisfy the English language requirements. One student from Bangladesh explained, **“I just participated in an interview from the university and from the UKVI. That’s it.”** They said they were frustrated that some universities still required a formal English language test, arguing that applicants should be able to provide written evidence or take part in an interview where appropriate, rather than being required to pay for a separate test.

A student from Malawi expressed similar concerns. They said, **“I was really upset about having to take an English language test. Malawi was a British colony, and many of our systems are still based on the standards from the British system. Our education system uses English as the medium of instruction, so I was surprised that I still had to take a separate test.”**

Student A is an undergraduate student from Abu Dhabi. Their family are Indian citizens and they were sent to boarding school in southern India, where they were one of a small group of elite students who were selected to take international A-levels, rather than the standard Indian curriculum in years 12 and 13. English was their favourite subject at high school.

When they chose English language as one of their A-levels, their teacher told them they would be exempt from an English language requirement if they applied to a UK university. However, despite gaining an A grade, along with being the top student in the Asia-Pacific in their AS English language examination, they were still required to take a separate English language test to meet the admission requirements.

One student from Kenya noted some UK universities were willing to accept a letter confirming that their previous education had been delivered in English, while others required a formal TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language], IELTS or equivalent test. They felt that this inconsistency made the process difficult to understand. Another Kenyan student who had studied at a UK branch campus in Malaysia assumed that they could seamlessly move onto a postgraduate degree in the UK, but was perplexed when they **“had to take the English language test again”** to come to the UK university.

Some students from India felt that being required to present an English language test result was offensive because their medium of instruction is English and they study English language and literature at school to an advanced level. One said, **“We are analysing Shakespeare, Chekhov, Dickens, Shelley, Keats, and Tolstoy. We write our own interpretations of these texts. And then you ask, ‘Why don’t you take an English exam? Because we don’t think you know English?’”**

A student from Kenya summarised their frustration by saying, **“The whole process is so stressful and kind of unfair. I am from an Anglophone country, but because my English is different, I had to take a test even though I have been taught in English since I was four. It feels unfair that, because we are from a ‘lesser’ country, we have to do more. I write English better than some English classmates who have been here all their lives, yet I was the one who needed to take a costly test that could make or break my admission.”**

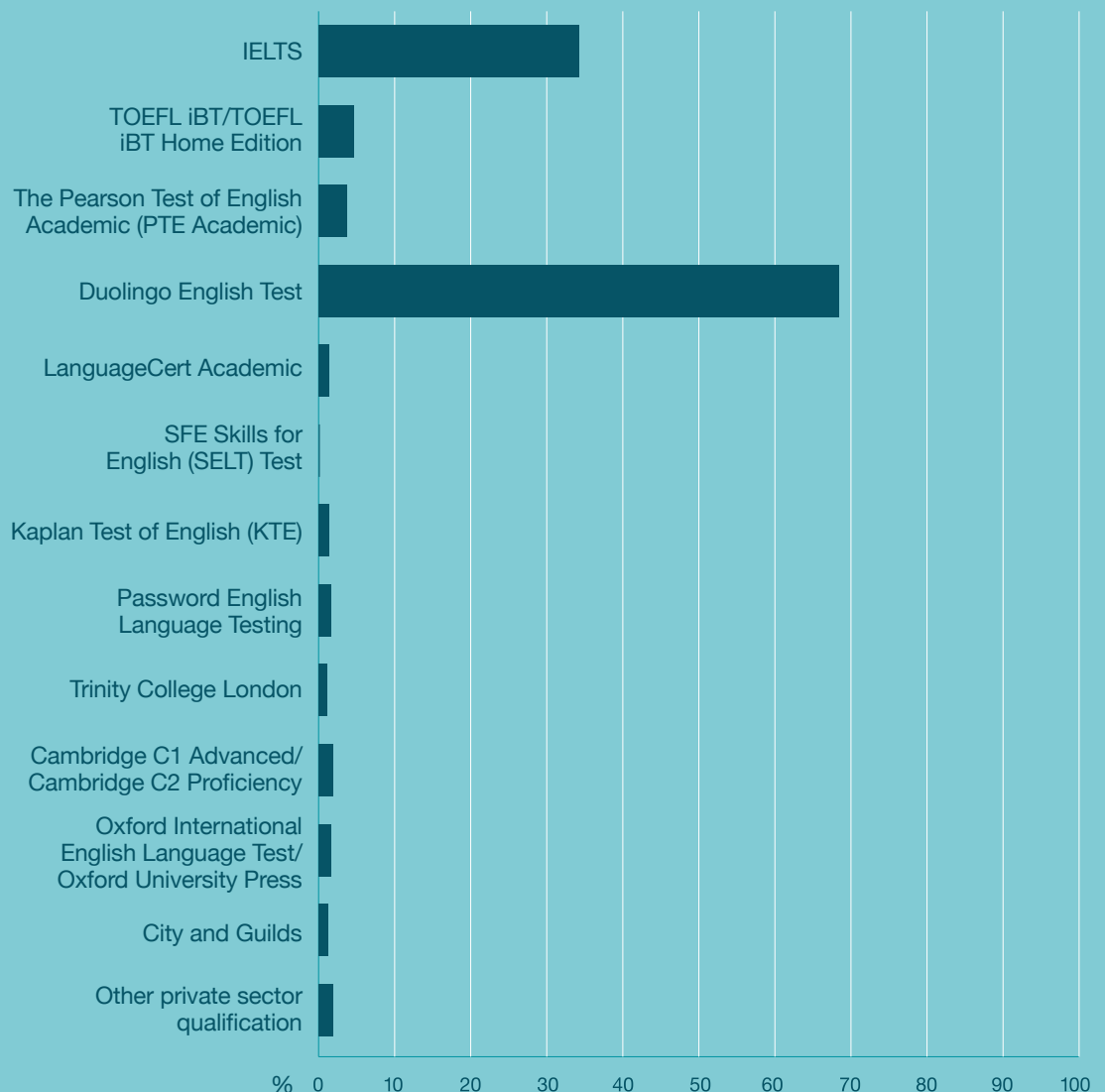
Key messages

Students from countries where English is the medium of instruction in education sometimes apply to use interviews or letters from previous universities or employers to meet English language requirements, but whether these are accepted varies considerably between universities and even academic departments. For students, these differences can seem inconsistent or arbitrary when reasons for them are not clearly explained.

Use of English language tests

- c. In response to the question, **Which test(s) of your English language ability have you used to apply for university in the UK?** respondents (N=565) confirmed that almost all the generally acceptable tests had been used, although there was a bias towards a very small number of the most popular tests (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Which test(s) of your English language ability have you used to apply for university in the UK?



The focus groups revealed that the choice of test is often shaped by institutions, rather than made solely by students. This institutional choice can be either by the future UK university or local universities where students have studied for their undergraduate degree. For example, one student from Kenya said, **“There was no real choice. My acceptance letter came with the requirement that I needed to do an IELTS test.”** Another student from Malawi said, **“For me, it wasn’t really my choice. I looked at the website, and they specifically wanted IELTS. So that’s what I went by.”**

Some universities outside the UK also require students to take English language tests as part of their degrees. One student from Vietnam, for example, explained, **“Originally, I took the test not because I wanted to apply to a university in the UK, but because I majored in English linguistics and IELTS was a graduation requirement at my university in Vietnam. In my faculty, students needed an overall of 6.5 to graduate.”**

Scholarship agencies can play a role in determining which type of test is taken. One student from Kenya explained, **“I had to take IELTS, and I was able to do it because my sponsorship programme allocated funding for the test. The scholarship agency specified whether we could take IELTS or TOEFL. The only thing they did not specify was whether we had to take it in person or remotely.”**

Agents are also important influencers in determining which English language tests students took. One student from Zambia explained that they had applied through an education agent and were guided through each stage of the process. They said they had not been aware that there were English language tests other than IELTS that could have been used for admission to their chosen university, because they were simply told, **“You have to do your IELTS test now.”**

Some participants in the focus groups argued that students often take English language tests long before applying for a UK university for other reasons. One Chinese student noted, **“People do not just use this kind of test as a ticket to university in another country. They also use it as a certificate of their English performance.”** They clarified, **“I took the IELTS in my high school and during my undergraduate, not for application, but because I wanted to understand my English ability more clearly.”**

The focus groups also highlighted perceived differences between English language tests in format, assessment style and the relative emphasis placed on different skills. These perceptions sometimes influence which test students choose. One participant explained that they chose a particular test because they felt confident they could achieve the required speaking score, while some peers with less confidence in spoken English looked for other tests they perceived to be better suited to their strengths.

Key messages

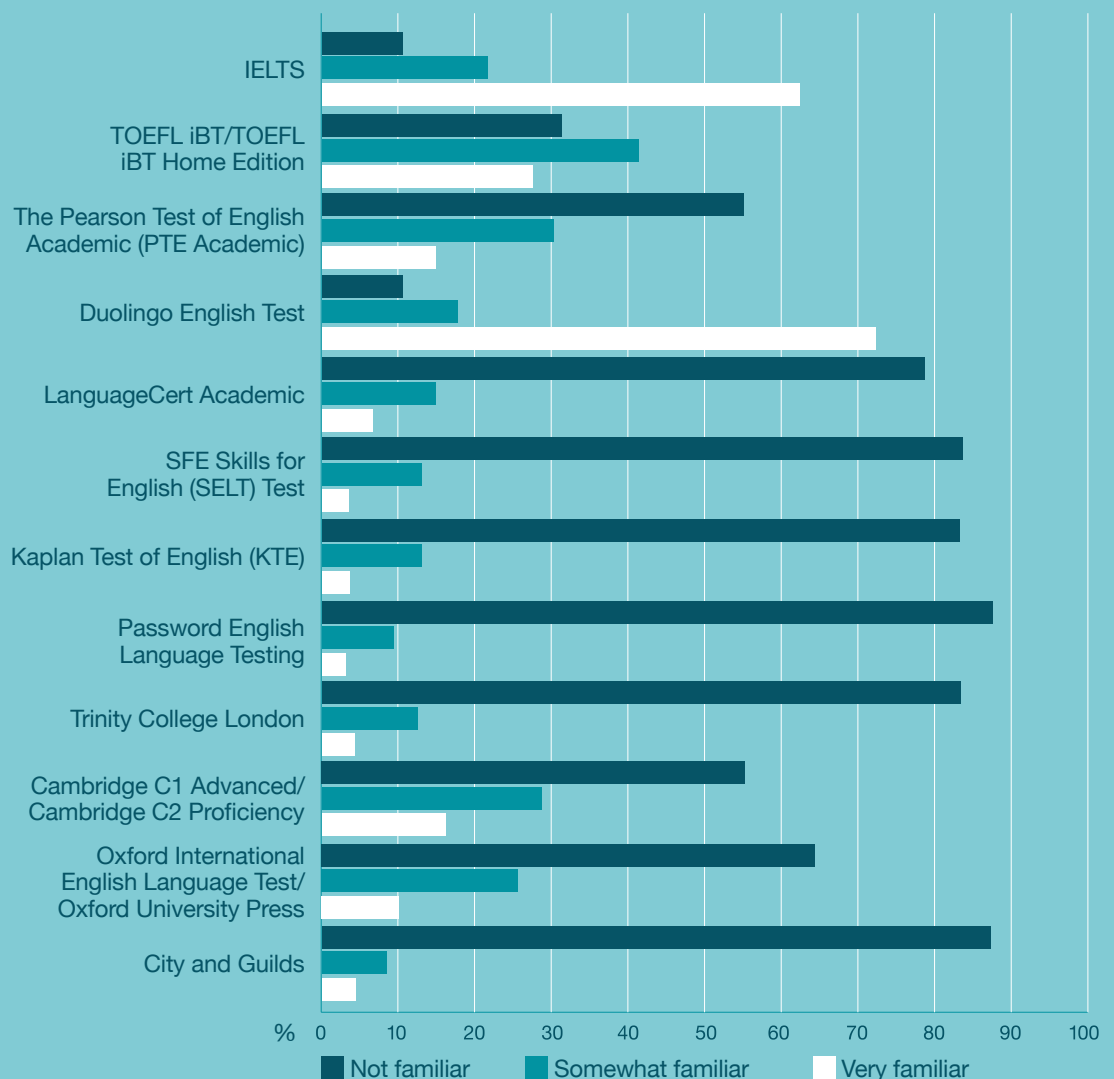
International students do not always decide which English language test to take. Some find that the choice is made for them by their local university where they studied for their undergraduate degree, by the UK university they are applying to, or by scholarship agencies and educational agents. There is a wide range of potential influencers and gatekeepers.

International students sometimes take English language tests for other reasons, prior to the decision to apply for university in the UK.

Awareness of English language tests

d. In response to the question, **Which of these English language tests are you familiar with?** respondents (N=547) appeared to be familiar with a wider range of test providers than those they reported using (Figure 4), although there was still a strong bias in favour of IELTS, TOEFL, the Pearson Test of English [PTE] and Duolingo English Test.

Figure 4 – Which of these English language tests are you familiar with?



The focus groups confirmed a general understanding that there is a wide range of English language tests but also revealed a certain frustration that it is unclear which tests are accepted by which universities. One student from India said, “**There are five or six exams that you can take: IELTS, TOEFL, SELT, Pearson and Cambridge. But every university might say, ‘We accept this, but not that.’ I feel that the Duolingo English Test has also started to become an official English exam, but I do not know how widely it is accepted. Imagine a student taking a test, getting the certification and then applying to a UK university, only to be told, ‘I’m sorry, we don’t recognise this English language test.’**”

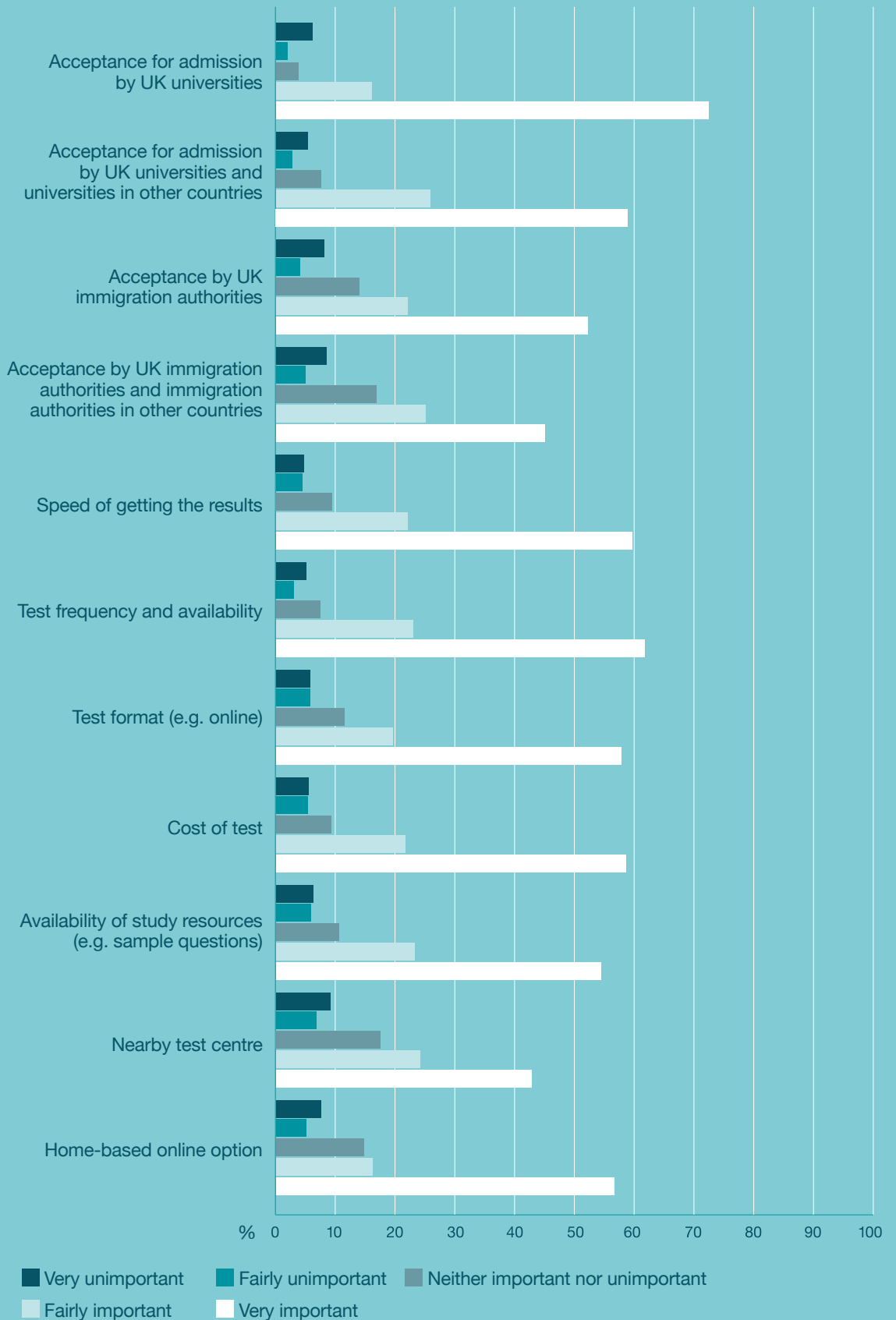
Key messages

There is a general awareness that there is a wide range of English language tests available, but some confusion about how acceptable some of the tests are to UK universities, leading international students to tend to limit their searches to the most established tests.

Selecting an English language test

- e. In response to the question, **How do you rate the following reasons for choosing your English language test provider?**, the response by respondents (N=532) showed a striking emphasis on the perceived benefits of their chosen English language test, dominated by the acceptance for admission by UK universities (72.4% very important), test frequency and availability (61.7%), speed of getting the test results (59.6%), acceptance for admission by both UK universities and universities in other countries (58.9%) and the cost of the test (58.5%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – How do you rate the following reasons for choosing your English language test provider?



The focus groups confirmed the importance of perceived acceptability. One student from China explained, **“When choosing an English language test, the first thing I consider is how many universities or routes the test can be used for.”** They said that tests perceived to be widely accepted across the UK, Europe, the US and Australia felt more useful, while they were uncertain about newer or less familiar tests. **“For some tests, I think only a very small number of universities or institutions take them into consideration, so that is the first thing I consider.”**

Another student from India also felt there was a geographical bias in the acceptability of some tests, noting, **“I never thought of taking TOEFL because I had this bias in my head. In India, people generally say, ‘You need TOEFL for some East Asian countries and the US. For Europe, IELTS is absolutely fine.’ So I ended up choosing IELTS.”**

In relation to the acceptability of test scores by UK immigration authorities, some focus group participants reported confusion or uncertainty about visa-related English language requirements and how these are communicated. One participant described a case in which two students from Bangladesh believed that the evidence they had provided was no longer sufficient and that they would need to attend a UKVI interview. They explained that this apparent change in requirements led one of the students to abandon their planned study in the UK and choose Australia as a study destination.

The availability of tests and speed of accessing results

The availability of tests was frequently cited by focus group participants as being important. One Indian student said, **“The main advantage of taking the test online was that there was no waiting period. Based on my availability, I could select any date. If I wanted to take the Duolingo English Test in the next hour, I could do that. That was not the case with IELTS, where the waiting period was at least two weeks and the centres were not centrally located. I remember the centre being around 25 miles from where I lived.”**

Discussing the importance of getting results quickly, one student who was getting close to the deadline for applying for a visa noted, **“In the first week of August, I took the Duolingo English Test and the scores were available within two days. My department received the scores by Friday, but then it was the weekend, so they replied to me by Tuesday. By that time, I got my unconditional offer letter.”** They added, **“If I have to prove that I am good at English and the turnaround time is three weeks, then what is the point? Unless I get my unconditional offer letter, I cannot apply for my visa or book a VFS² appointment.”**

² VFS Global is an official partner of UK Visas and Immigration in many countries and operates visa application centres where applicants may attend appointments to submit documents and provide biometric information, such as fingerprints and a photograph, as part of the UK visa application process.

Student B is a postgraduate student from India. They completed their undergraduate degree in India, where the language of instruction was English. When they applied to a UK university, departmental staff told them that they would not need an English language test because of their first degree. However, their conditional offer letter required them to provide an English language test result.

The earliest IELTS appointment available would have come too late for them to meet the deadline to apply for a UK student visa. When they asked their prospective department for urgent help, they were sent a prepaid Duolingo English Test login and were able to meet the imminent deadline.

A number of participants in the focus groups stressed the importance of adequate materials to prepare for the test. One said, **“If I want to prepare for a test, I need mock tests or study materials. For IELTS and TOEFL, there are plenty of materials available, so the availability and convenience of preparation materials is very important.”**

Cost considerations

In the focus groups, the cost of the test was a recurring theme. One student from Vietnam explained, **“Many of my friends avoided IELTS because it was quite expensive compared with TOEIC [the Test of English for International Communication] or V-Step, the Vietnamese standardised test of English proficiency, which was organised internally by my university. My friends tended to take those tests instead of IELTS.”**

Another student from Kenya complained, **“Taking a third-party test such as TOEFL or IELTS is very expensive in my country. It costs about US\$450, compared with a minimum wage of around US\$120. That is very expensive for one English language test.”**

A student from Zambia added, **“I had to pay for the actual test, then make a separate payment for using the location, and then separate payments for each of the training days. It was payment after payment after payment.”**

For some students, the cost of the test is prohibitive. One student said, **“What I hear from friends, especially those looking to apply to universities in the UK, is that the minute they see, ‘You need the IELTS or TOEFL test,’ that is the end of the application journey. They do not proceed any further and start looking at other countries.”**

Being deterred by the cost of the English language test may seem irrational, in relation to the cost of subsequently living and studying in the UK. However, for international students at the start of their journey, the language test can seem speculative especially if they are not confident that they will achieve the test score required to apply or that a particular test will be acceptable to their chosen university or destination country of study.

The focus groups confirmed that, given the costs and logistical challenges of travelling to a test centre, tests which could be completed from home were very attractive. One Indian student described the Duolingo English Test as accessible and convenient in practical terms, noting that it could be taken from home and fitted more easily around their schedule and application deadlines.

Key messages

The acceptance of English language tests by UK universities and immigration authorities is very important, but there is considerable uncertainty among international students about which tests will be accepted by which institutions.

Some participants appeared to perceive IELTS as being primarily for UK universities and TOEFL as being more associated with East Asian and US universities.

Lack of clarity about which tests are accepted is compounded by uncertainty about immigration requirements and how these are communicated to students.

The availability of tests and the speed of results are regarded as highly important. Tests that can be booked quickly and provide prompt results are particularly valued. This can be critically important for students facing deadlines to apply for visas.

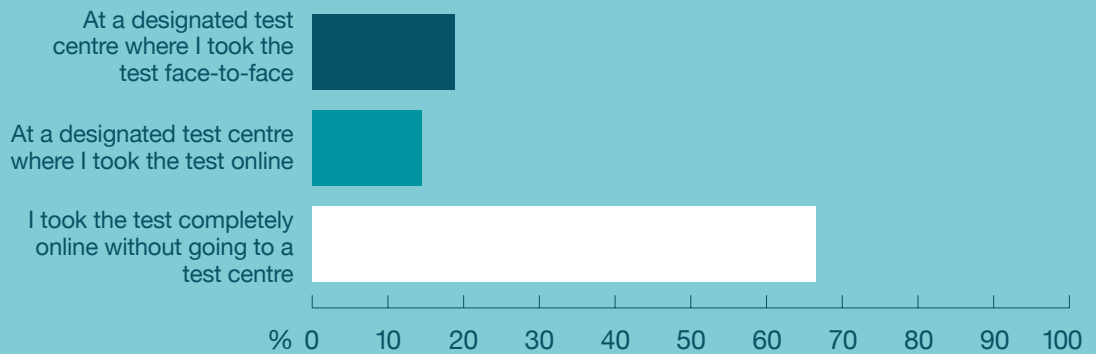
The availability of preparatory materials is important, particularly as international students find some test formats unfamiliar and formulaic.

The costs of English language tests are regarded as high, particularly by students who are still at the exploratory stage of deciding where to study.

Taking the English language test

- f. In response to the question, **How did you take your English language test?** 66.6% of respondents (N=530) reported that they had taken the test completely online (Figure 6). This result aligns with the response to the previous question, where the availability of a home-based option was not in the top five reasons for selecting the test, but was rated as very important by 56.6% of respondents.

Figure 6 – How did you take your English language test?



The focus groups included a number of students who live in metropolitan centres, where it is convenient to go to a test centre to take the English language test face to face or online. However, participants also highlighted that the logistical challenges of travelling to a test centre from more rural areas and second-tier cities can be substantial. Separately, within the survey sample, 66.6% of respondents reported taking their test completely online without going to a test centre.

One student from India summed up the challenges of travelling to a test centre: **“I have family members who do not live in capital regions. They are in more remote areas and would have to travel to major cities for their test centres. When you choose the date, you need to make sure your travel arrangements are in place. You also need to arrive in advance, because if there is an issue with the train or bus, you do not want to miss the exam.”**

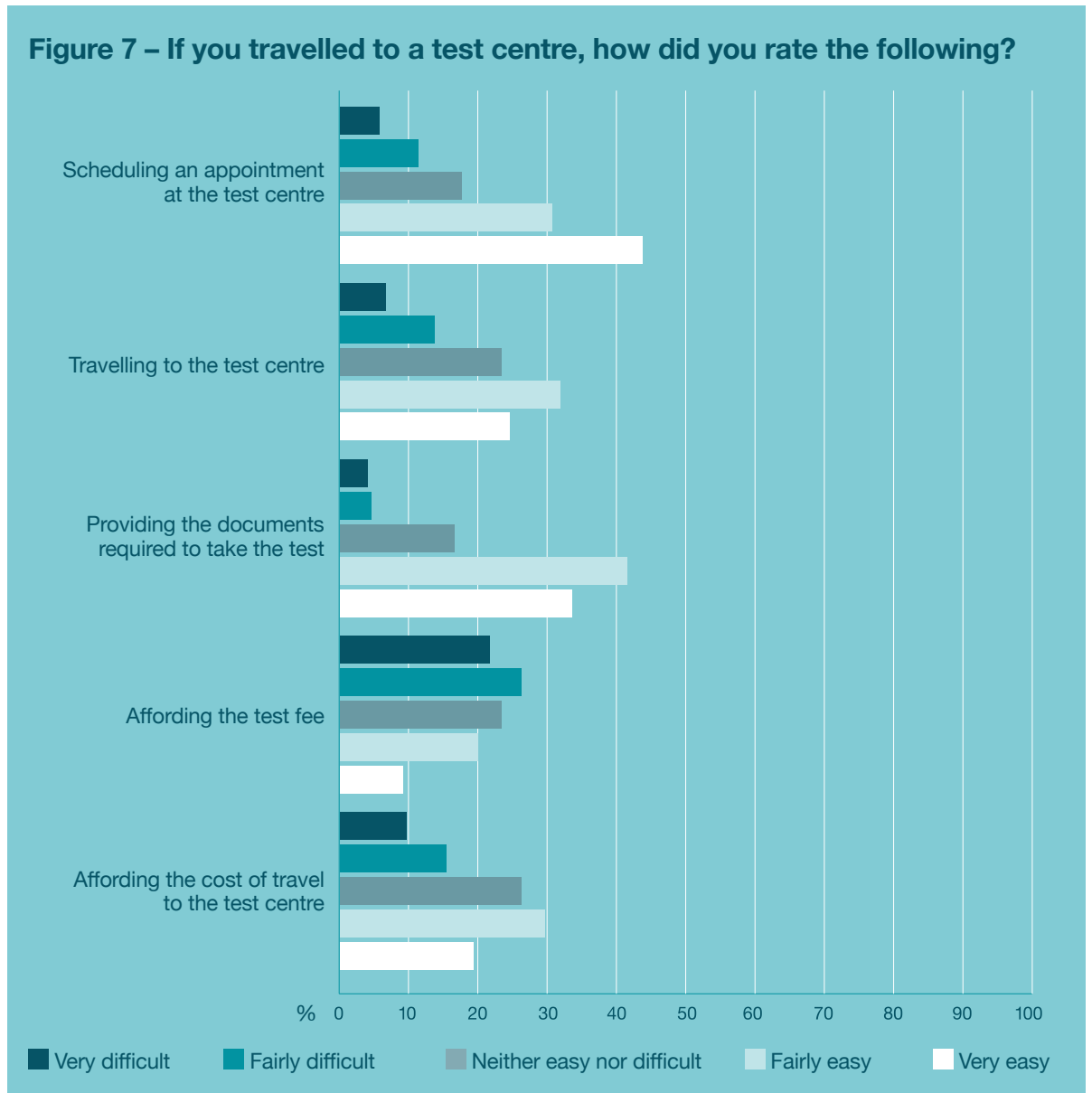
A student from Cabo Verde, a small island state in the Atlantic Ocean, concluded, **“In smaller countries and developing regions, international applicants may face logistical and financial barriers when accessing traditional testing centres. The possibility of completing a recognised English language test fully online helped reduce stress, travel requirements and scheduling difficulties during the university application process. I believe flexible and digitally accessible English language testing can play an important role in making international education more inclusive and accessible for talented students from diverse backgrounds around the world.”**

Key messages

The costs and logistical challenges of travelling to a test centre from more remote areas are high, so participants valued remote or digitally accessible options.

Accessing the English language test

g. In response to the question, **If you travelled to a test centre, how did you rate the following?** respondents (N=176) generally reported that it was fairly or very easy to schedule an appointment, travel to the test centre and provide the necessary documentation (Figure 7). However, 47.3% felt that affording the test fee was either very or fairly difficult.



The focus groups highlighted the variability in access to English language test centres, with the main metropolitan areas in countries like China being well served, but relatively few centres in some sub-Saharan African countries. One student from Kenya said, **“We do not have many test centres, so the closest test centre can sometimes determine which test you choose.”** They continued, **“I had to travel around 270 kilometres to get to an IELTS centre.”**

Another student from India described the practical burden of travelling to a test centre: **“I clearly remember taking IELTS five or six years ago, and it was quite a hassle. There wasn’t a test centre in my city because I come from a small town,**

so I had to take the test in another city. I travelled overnight to take the exam, and at that time the speaking test did not happen on the same day as listening, reading and writing. I then had to return another week to take my speaking test, which was a real hassle. It takes a huge toll on a student.”

A student from Zambia also reported the difficulties of going to and from the test centre multiple times. They said, **“I was not only there for the test, but also for three or four days of training and then the exam day as well. It was a hassle going back and forth. My test was also spaced out, so I had my speaking test on one day and my listening test on another day. That is where the inconvenience came in for me.”**

Technical issues with computer-based testing can sometimes affect students’ experience, whether tests are taken remotely or at a test centre. One student from Kenya described difficulties during a digital test taken at a test centre: **“During my last exam in Kenya, the wi-fi connection was not working properly. Resolving the issue took time, as the centre had to seek advice on how to purchase new cables during the exam period. This disrupted the exam and affected my concentration. The speaking session was particularly affected. I had to complete it twice, but the connection was still malfunctioning. Overall, although I was aware of my ability, my results were influenced by circumstances beyond my control.”**

A student from Cuba provided the most extreme example of such difficulties. They said, **“Honestly, the options available for Cubans living in Cuba are very limited. At the time, I needed to take an English language test, IELTS was not available, and even taking the Duolingo English Test was extremely difficult. I faced several problems related to the restrictions imposed on Cuba, including limitations on the use of Google services and technical issues with the test platform itself. In the end, I was only able to take the test by travelling to Spain.”**

Key messages

For students living in large metropolitan cities, access to test centres is relatively straightforward.

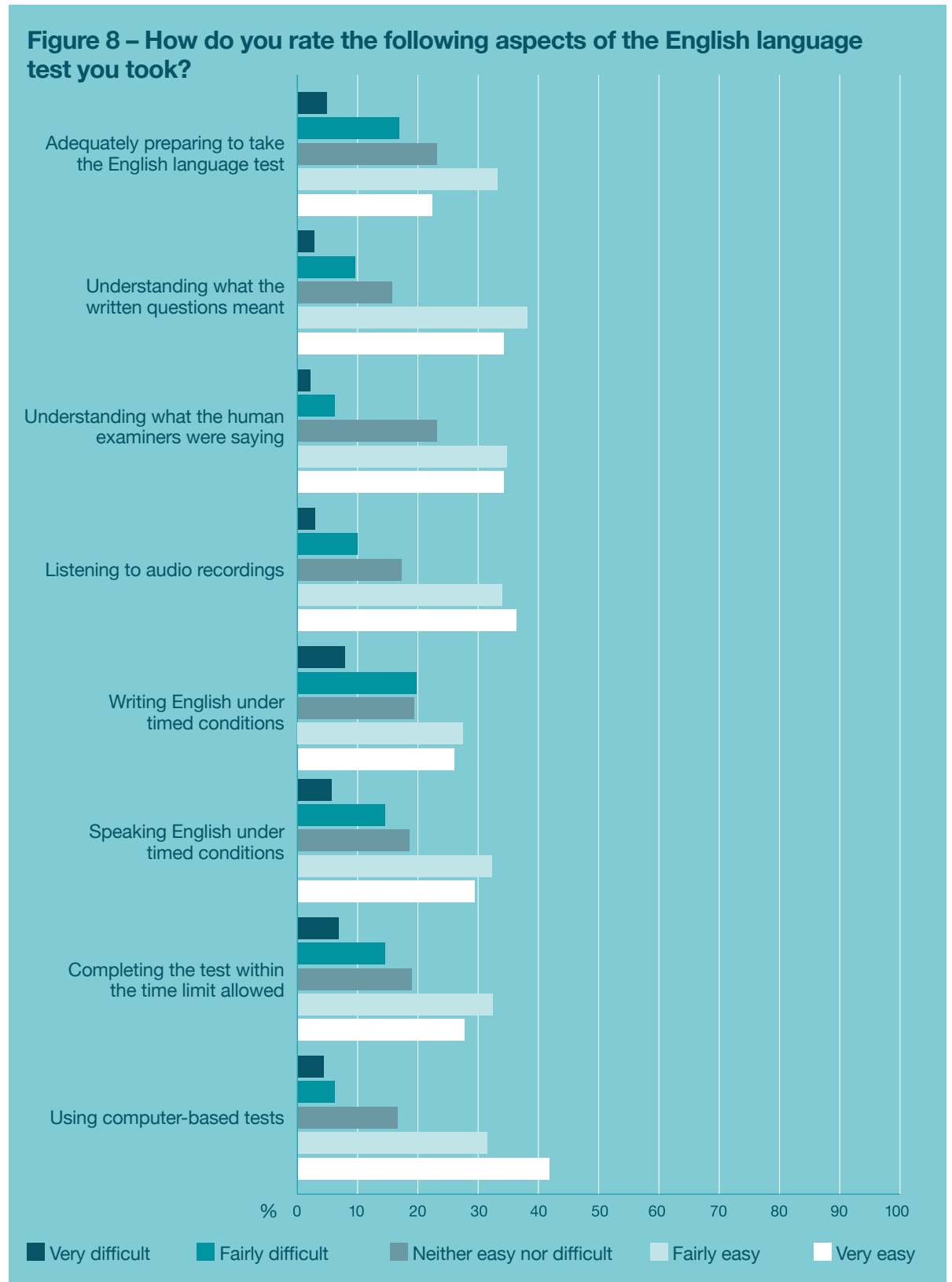
For students living in rural areas, second-tier cities or regions with fewer test centres, travelling to a test centre can be expensive and logistically challenging, often involving additional travel, accommodation costs or time away from school, university or work.

Uneven access to test centres can compound existing inequalities between students with different financial, geographical and logistical circumstances.

Some participants reported technological, infrastructure-related or platform-access challenges when taking English language tests. These challenges may affect remote tests taken from home and computer-based tests delivered in test centres.

Experience of the English language test

h. In response to the question, **How do you rate the following aspects of the English language test you took?** respondents (N=525) generally rated the tests as fairly or very easy (Figure 8). The slight outlier was writing English under timed conditions, where 26.4% of respondents felt that the test was very or fairly difficult.



Discussions with the focus groups revealed that some English language tests are perceived to more closely align with the assessment styles of the home country. One Chinese student said, **“I did some mock tests and found that IELTS was closely related to my Gaokao³ preparation. With my foundation from the Gaokao, I could prepare for IELTS more easily. TOEFL had question types and paper combinations that were quite different from the Gaokao, so I preferred to choose the more familiar option.”**

Some students also reported feeling that some tests are more aligned with the variety of English they had learned. One student from Kenya said, **“My home is in Nairobi, so my options were TOEFL or IELTS at that time. I chose IELTS for two reasons. First, I had studied A-levels, so British English was what I had learned and was fluent in. TOEFL felt more American. The other reason was that the British Council had an IELTS prize at that time.”**

Some focus group participants perceived certain English language tests as highly format driven. They felt that success depends not only on English language proficiency, but also on understanding test conventions, expected response structures and strategies for performing well under timed conditions. One participant from Kenya explained, **“It’s not just the English that we must know,”** while another from Abu Dhabi said that they felt they had to **“conform to the format that the examiners expect.”**

The same participant illustrated this perception through a writing task in which they were asked to describe a picture of a playground. They explained, **“I described it to the best of my ability, but if you give me a picture, I might describe the tree first, while another person might describe the swings first. It felt as though you had to fit into a structure that had already been decided.”** These comments point to a perceived distinction between demonstrating English ability in a test environment and using English flexibly in academic or everyday contexts.

Student C is a Chinese postgraduate taught student who completed their undergraduate study in Shanghai. At high school, they scored very highly in English in the Gaokao examinations and felt confident about their ability to communicate in English after passing their English language test for UK university admission. When they arrived in the UK to study history, they found themselves unprepared for both everyday vernacular British English and the discipline-specific English vocabulary used by their lecturers, describing their first few weeks as a “nightmare”.

Based on this experience, they now realise that passing an English language test for university admission is the first step on the longer journey of mastering the English language for conversational and academic purposes.

³ The Gaokao is China’s national university entrance examination, taken by students at the end of senior secondary school.

Students in the focus groups expressed concern that they might underperform in unfamiliar test conditions. One student from Kenya said, **“The test was the most difficult thing for me, not because I cannot speak English, but because of the test environment itself. When someone tells you, ‘Now I am testing you,’ it puts so much pressure on you. Even though you can communicate in English, you may find yourself unable to meet the required standard because of the feelings and emotions that the idea of a test creates.”**

Another student from Malawi said that, despite being educated in English as a medium of instruction, they were so stressed that they failed to get a good enough score the first time. They said, **“You do not know what to expect or what kind of English they want. I went in feeling anxious the first time. The test is also strictly timed, and you do not have time to go out. At one point, with the anxiety and everything else, I had to leave and then come back to continue the exam. In the end, I got a 6.5, which was not the score they needed.”**

Another student from Colombia felt that test performance should not depend so heavily on strict timing: **“I do not think the ability to manage different English skills should depend so heavily on time. When I studied independently, at my own pace, I felt much more confident in my English. But under timed test conditions, my performance changed considerably because of the pressure. I found it difficult to concentrate, and I would have preferred a test with more flexible timing.”** A student from Kenya similarly concluded, **“I believe the results from my English language test are not a true representation of my capabilities. Several factors affected my performance, including technical difficulties, time pressure, anxiety and financial stress.”**

Students from countries where English is not used in daily life reported that the writing and speaking tests were the most difficult to prepare to take. One student said, **“Writing and speaking in English are quite hard for me because, in daily life in China, we do not use English to write or speak.”** Some students also felt that aspects of some English language tests reflected culturally specific contexts that were unfamiliar to them, which could make certain tasks more difficult. One said, **“IELTS is a UK-based test, so it reflects some aspects of British culture and everyday life. We do not always have access to those contexts because I am in China.”**

One illustration of this cultural unfamiliarity was given by a student discussing the differences between street layouts in the UK and China. They explained that map-based listening tasks could be difficult not because of the language itself, but because the physical layout being described was unfamiliar. In their words, **“The difficulty is not listening. The difficulty is having to picture north, south, east and west in my head.”**

Another example was the difference in communication practices. One Chinese student said, **“In the UK, we receive many letters from banks, phone companies and universities. But in China, we do not use letters as official documents, and we do not use emails as much. We use chat groups, like WhatsApp, where teachers send daily notifications. So when English language tests include letters or emails, they can be hard to relate to.”**

One student from Vietnam felt disadvantaged by English language tests that used fast-changing colloquial expressions. They said, **“In the IELTS speaking test, you need to know a lot of idiomatic language. But in Vietnam, our textbooks are updated only about once every ten years, so we do not really get that exposure. Many people are stressed about it, and I was stressed about it too.”**

Key messages

Some English language tests are perceived as aligning more or less closely to the conventional assessment regimes of the home country.

Learners of British English tend to gravitate to IELTS and learners of American English to TOEFL.

Some English language tests are regarded by students as formulaic, so that students have to learn the format required to pass the test rather than be competent in English.

Timed test conditions can put students under intense pressure and may affect their performance in speaking and writing, where they are required to produce language actively under high-stakes conditions. This should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of inadequate English language ability.

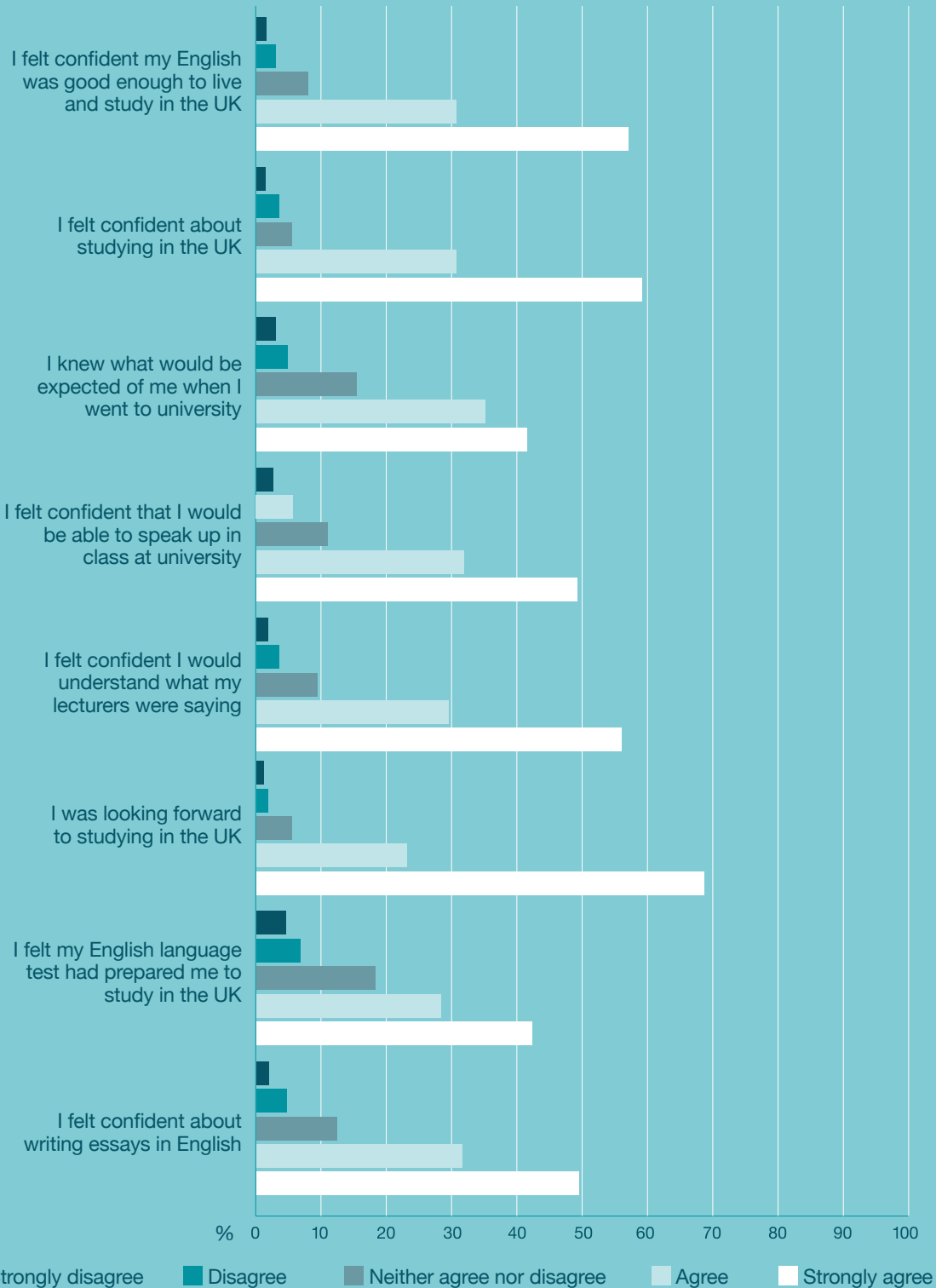
Some participants perceived culturally specific assumptions or unfamiliar contexts in some English language tests, which could make tasks more challenging for students whose everyday educational or social contexts differ from those reflected in the test.

Some English language tests include colloquial terms that may be unfamiliar to teachers and not covered in textbooks in students' home countries.

Preparedness for life in the UK

- i. When asked the question, **After passing the required English language test but before leaving home, how do you rate the following?** respondents (N=516) overwhelmingly expressed their confidence in feeling prepared for university study in the UK, although 11.3% strongly disagreed or disagreed that their English language test had prepared them to study in the UK (Figure 9).

Figure 9 – After passing the required English language test but before leaving home, how do you rate the following?



The focus groups revealed that the participants generally feel confident about their ability to study in English, regardless of the English language test taken. One Indian student summarised their experience by saying, **“The English language test helped me meet the university requirements, although studying in the UK still felt different from the test environment. Academic writing, speaking confidently in seminars and adapting to independent learning took time. Overall, the process was stressful, but the English language test helped me feel more prepared before moving to the UK.”**

A Nepalese student said, **“It is good to be able to show your English skills through an English language test. It acts as proof to yourself and others that you know the basics of the English language and have the ability to live in the UK.”**

A student from Angola confirmed, **“Regarding the English language test for admission, I found it challenging at first, but ultimately very beneficial. Preparing for the test improved my academic writing, listening, and speaking skills, which made it easier to follow lectures and participate in discussions once I arrived in the UK. Although the test was stressful, it gave me confidence that I could succeed in an English-speaking academic environment.”**

However, notwithstanding their confidence in their English language ability, some participants feel less well prepared for the shift in academic expectation and pedagogical style in the UK. This was not always about English language proficiency itself, but about understanding academic conventions such as critical thinking, critical writing, independent learning and discipline-specific expectations. One student from Malawi said, **“because our writing is more descriptive, criticality was really something that needs to be amplified. So, if there was some sort of preparation for me, critical thinking and critical writing would have helped me more.”**

Another student from Nigeria also felt that they would have benefited more from preparation and testing in critical thinking. They said, **“Coming here, it is more about critical reading, critical thinking and critical writing. It would have been helpful to be prepared in that direction.”**

A student from Iran said that, while they had been confident about studying in the UK, they would have benefited from clear preparation for independent learning, academic writing and referencing expectations. They explained that the structure of their course required a high level of self-directed study, which they had not fully anticipated, and that they had to learn quickly how to write essays and reference correctly.

Key messages

International students generally feel that the English language tests make them feel confident about studying in English, regardless of whether the tests are in person or online.

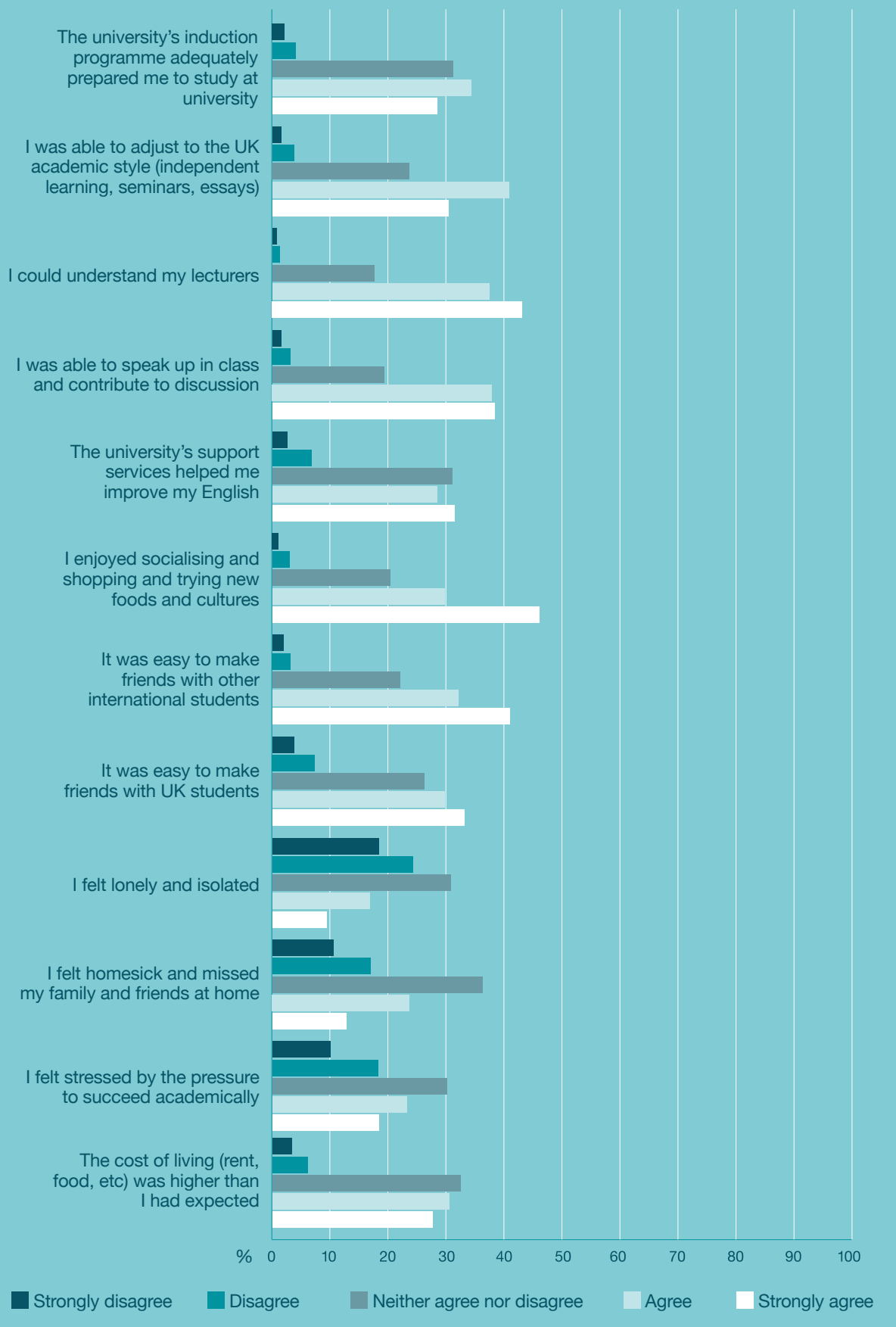
Students feel much less prepared to adjust to pedagogical styles in the UK and particularly the focus on critical, rather than descriptive, writing. A greater focus on preparing students for this aspect of UK academic culture would be welcome.

Students are unprepared for the emphasis on independent learning and feel that they need support to develop the skills to manage their study time effectively.

Transition into UK study and life

- j. With reference to their first few months at university in the UK, in response to the question, **Looking back on the first three months of your time at university in the UK, how do you rate the following?** respondents (N=478) reported that they generally felt that their university's induction programme and support services had helped them to settle in, and that they were able to participate in class and adjust to the pedagogical style (Figure 10). However, a significant minority (41.6%) reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that they felt stressed by the pressure to succeed academically, and 58.2% agreed or strongly agreed that the cost of living (for example, rent, food) was higher than they had expected.

Figure 10 – Looking back on the first three months of your time at university in the UK, how do you rate the following?



During discussions in the focus groups, students said that they generally felt that their university induction programmes had prepared them well for study. Several postgraduate students reported that the biggest adjustment had been changing from a descriptive to a critical form of academic writing. A student from Nigeria said, **“My university was quite helpful. We had many sessions showing us what it means to read and think critically. But it was still overwhelming because I was not prepared for it and did not have enough background knowledge to draw on.”**

Some students expressed disappointment at the lack of support from their university in adjusting to life in the UK. One student from Zambia said, **“Initially it was a bit hard. Navigating a whole new system, including a new healthcare system and things as well as how to purchase a data plan, was very different. Transport systems were very different.”**

A student from Kenya who had enjoyed a very positive induction programme, in contrast, said, **“My university was unique because it offered introductory sessions on British culture before I joined. I found them really useful because it was almost like a two-week boot camp on what to expect in the UK.”**

Several students reported that they found everyday conversational English the hardest to master. They were critical of some English language tests for the way they had prepared them to speak in a very artificial or unnatural way. One student who had studied in Malaysia observed that the test they had taken **“was not structured around the way British people speak in everyday life. The grammatical rules tested were completely different from how people speak in England today. I live in London, and if I spoke in the way the test expected me to, a British person would look at me as though I had lost my mind.”**

Another student from Kenya said, **“I did not really need IELTS when I came here, because no one here speaks like that around me. You can use a certain phrase and people will look at you and say, ‘Where did you learn this type of English?’”**

One student from Vietnam observed, **“One thing nobody expects when preparing for the test is humour. I go to work, and my colleagues make a lot of jokes, but most of the time I do not really understand them. I am still trying to get the hang of what they are talking about.”**

One Indian student had experienced difficulties with their English being understood by local people in their university town. They attributed this to differences in tone and expressiveness rather than a technical shortcoming in their English. They explained that they had learned to express emotion more naturally in Hindi than in English, adding that **“sometimes it becomes very difficult when English is not your first language to express how you are feeling in the way you want.”**

The same student summarised the fundamental challenge they felt speaking English to classmates. **“I do not want to adapt to an accent because I am not ashamed of my roots, the way I speak or the background I carry. But I also do not want to be sidelined or stigmatised because of the tone I speak in.”**

In the same vein, reflecting on their struggle to fit into their new setting, one student from Zambia said, **“The hardest part was learning how to fit in and still be myself in this new environment.”**

Commenting on the difficulties of making friends with UK people, some students mentioned that coming from a culture where alcohol is prohibited or discouraged creates cultural barriers to integration. One said, **“If you do not drink, and drinking is a big part of social life in the UK, it can be alienating. People meet in pubs, and that is where they make friends. If you do not take part in that, it becomes harder to find your people and feel integrated.”**

Some students found the UK-centric framing of academic issues surprising. One student from Kenya said, **“I expected to be in a global university and to have a global view of things, but many examples and perspectives were rooted in a specific UK context. When you come from a different culture, it can be difficult to adjust when so much of what you are learning is based on another cultural setting.”**

Several students commented on the current political climate and a perceived antipathy by some sections of society to international students. One student from Kenya said, **“The rhetoric against people coming to the UK is not positive. It affects our mental health and how integrated we feel in the society we are stepping into. Someone who is planning to give everything up and start a new life somewhere else needs to feel welcome and wanted.”**

Key messages

International students generally feel that their university induction programmes have prepared them for academic study.

The picture is more mixed in terms of preparing students for life in the UK, and some students feel that they do not receive enough support while others feel thoroughly prepared by their universities.

Students find adjusting to conversational everyday English, often with a myriad of regional and national accents, difficult. English language tests have done little to prepare them for this adjustment.

Students with good technical English often find it difficult to make themselves understood to local residents because differences in tone, accent or expressiveness can affect how they are understood.

There are significant cultural barriers to international students being able to integrate with UK students or make UK friends.

A challenge for international students is to balance fitting in and assimilating with retaining their national and cultural identity.

The current political climate in the UK serves to make international students feel less welcome.

7. Recommendations and conclusions

In broad terms, the following conclusions reflect the experiences of international students in this study, while pointing to wider issues that may affect international students seeking admission to UK universities. However, there are some important differences between sub-groups, notably that students from Commonwealth countries and former British colonies – where the main language of instruction in schools and universities is English – and graduates from UK transnational education programmes, may be able to satisfy entry requirements without needing an English language test result. The obstacles to international students posed by the cost and location of physical test centres are also disproportionately higher for some sub-groups, for example those with lower household incomes or those who live in more remote areas.

Recommendation 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.

English language testing was a common experience among respondents in this study. Almost all the international students who responded to this survey (c.90%) had relied on English language tests to apply for a place at a UK university.

International students are aware that there is a wide range of English language tests to choose from, but they lack clarity on which are generally accepted by UK universities, so that they tend to rely on a few of the best-known tests.

The issue is not only whether information exists, but whether it is easy to find, consistently understood across the institution and clearly communicated at key points in the application journey. For example, where websites, offer letters or adviser communications refer to one test as shorthand, students may interpret this as limiting the range of accepted English language evidence options.

International students' choice of English language test is often heavily influenced by a range of gatekeepers, including universities, scholarship bodies and education agents.

International students, both through the quantitative survey and the focus groups, confirmed that the English language tests they had taken had adequately prepared them for study in the UK and there appeared to be no discernible difference between tests taken at physical test centres and those taken online. However, international students did report that English language tests prepare students to use language in a more formal and artificial way than the language they experience on arrival in the UK.

Some students felt that some English language tests were better suited to different disciplines, highlighting the importance of choice.

The main English language tests do not prepare students to study at UK universities in terms of developing and assessing their critical thinking or their ability to learn independently.

Recommendation 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.

International students place great importance on English language tests being widely accepted by universities and immigration authorities in a variety of destination countries including the UK. They highlight the importance of having a range of English language evidence options to choose from to ensure that they are able to meet the likely requirements for universities based in multiple countries.

International students value English language tests that are affordable and readily available, have a rapid turnaround in terms of getting results, and are supported by good preparatory materials, including 'mock' tests.

They assign a high value to the speed of being able to book a test appointment and the promptness of receiving the results. Deadlines for visa applications and scheduling visa interviews can be very tight, and missing the deadlines may mean that the opportunity to enrol at a UK university is lost for a full year.

The cost of English language tests is a major consideration and can, in extreme cases, be prohibitively high, deterring international students from applying for a UK university. This is particularly true for students in low-income countries, where test fees can often represent a substantial proportion on household income, making cost an effective barrier to entry. These costs risk disproportionately affecting students from emerging markets, who are already under-represented in UK higher education.

The findings also highlight the importance of maintaining a range of accessible testing options. Within this survey sample, 66.6% of respondents who answered this question reported taking their English language test completely online. However, for some students, technological or legal obstacles mean that online testing is not feasible. This underlines the importance of flexibility and choice, while recognising that different students may need different routes depending on their financial, geographical, technological and logistical circumstances.

For students who have to travel to English language test centres, access can be relatively straightforward for students in large cities but logistically challenging for those students living in second-tier cities, rural areas or countries with fewer test

centres. Travelling to a test centre can involve additional costs, time away from school, university or work, and greater uncertainty around transport and accommodation.

These differences in access can compound existing inequalities between students with different financial, geographical and logistical circumstances. Remote test-taking options may help improve access for some students, while recognising that different delivery models, whether remote or test-centre based, require appropriate quality, security and accessibility measures.

Some students feel that some English language tests are better suited to different disciplines, learning styles or personal strengths, further highlighting the importance of choice.

Recommendation 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.

Some participants reported that some English language tests are formulaic and feel that they may test whether students know how to pass the tests, rather than being a genuine test of their English ability.

International students find timed test conditions highly stressful, especially the sections of the test in which they have to write or speak English. Where timed speaking and writing tasks are used, test providers should ensure that candidates have access to clear preparation materials, realistic practice opportunities and transparent information about task formats and assessment expectations, so that students are not disadvantaged by unfamiliarity with the test format rather than by their English language ability.

Some students perceive elements of cultural unfamiliarity in some English language tests, particularly when test content feels distant from their own everyday context or prior educational experience.

Recommendation 4

UK universities should develop a shared cross-institutional understanding that meeting English language requirements is not the end point of student preparedness, and they should ensure that academic and professional services staff are equipped to support international student communities.

International students, both in the quantitative survey and the focus groups, generally reported that the English language tests they had taken adequately prepared them for study in the UK. Within this sample, there appears to be no discernible difference in reported preparedness between tests taken at physical test centres and those taken online. However, international students did report that English language tests prepare students to use language in a more formal and artificial way than the language they experience on arrival in the UK.

Overall, across in-person and online test takers, respondents and participants generally feel that their English language skills enable them to participate in their course of study, although some feel less well prepared for differences in pedagogical styles.

Some participants feel that the main English language tests do not fully prepare students to study at UK universities in terms of developing and assessing critical thinking, independent learning or discipline-specific academic language.

Students in this study were generally positive about university induction programmes and their preparation for academic study, although the picture is more mixed in terms of support for life in the UK. Participants reported feeling less well prepared for non-academic language, with regional dialects, humour and informal communication proving more challenging.

This suggests that English language requirements should not be treated as the end point of student preparedness or as a guarantee that students will immediately feel confident in all academic, social or everyday contexts. However, a lack of immediate confidence in these contexts should not be interpreted as evidence of inadequate English language ability. It may instead reflect the challenge of adjusting to unfamiliar academic conventions, discipline-specific language, regional accents, humour, informal communication and everyday life in the UK. Universities and the wider sector also have an important role in supporting students' transition into UK academic culture, independent learning and everyday life, and in ensuring that academic and professional services staff are equipped to support international student communities.

Recommendation 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.

Many international students have studied in English-medium education systems or have completed qualifications delivered in English, including those from some Commonwealth countries and former British territories, for example India, Singapore, Malaysia, Ghana and Nigeria. There are also an increasing number of international students who have taken their undergraduate degrees at the international branch campuses of UK universities and are seeking to transfer to the UK for postgraduate study.

Participants reported a lack of consistency in how such evidence is treated, with some universities using their discretion to waive English language tests and others requiring a standalone test result instead of using other evidence from applicants' previous universities or employers, or from interviews. Greater clarity and consistency would help students, advisers and institutions understand when alternative forms of evidence may be accepted, while maintaining appropriate academic and regulatory standards.

This call for greater consistency acknowledges that not all institutions operate under the same regulatory, sponsor or admission arrangements, and some may have less scope than others to self-assess English language ability or accept alternative forms of evidence. However, where discretion is available, greater clarity and consistency would help students and advisers understand what evidence may be accepted.

In conclusion, international students differ widely in terms of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, family income, location and linguistic background, and the intersection of these characteristics can significantly shape their access to, experience of and ability to demonstrate English language ability through different forms of assessment. This means that diversity in English language test provision can play a critical role in ensuring that learners with different backgrounds, learning styles and personal circumstances can access an English language test that meets their needs.

The findings suggest that, as with UK applicants, international students require flexibility to support access and equity, alongside clear information, rigorous standards and effective support before and after arrival. Participants also reported that the current political climate in the UK has affected their wider student experience, reflecting the continuing importance of UKCISA's #WeAreInternational Student Charter.

Overall, this study illustrates the critical importance of placing the international student voice at the heart of any discussion about the future of English language testing for UK university admission.

8. References

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