

IELTS rules change for overseas nurses

The NMC announced on Monday that the [rules for IELTS for overseas nurses](#) hoping to relocate to work in the UK would be changed.

Until Monday, all nurses needed to score 7.0 (out of 9) in each of the 4 papers (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking) in the [IELTS Academic English test](#) in 1 sitting in order to satisfy NMC criteria. This is advanced level, equivalent to C1 in the [Common European Framework](#), and is actually higher than the score typically required by international students wanting to study at the UK's top universities, which tends to be 6.5.

Under the new rules, 7.0 is still required in the 4 Academic IELTS papers, but can now be taken from 2 separate tests, as long as they are within 6 months of each other, and the test-taker scores a minimum 6.5 in all papers. This means a nurse can score 7.0 in 2 papers in 1 test and then 7.0 in the other 2 papers in a subsequent test.

Why introduce this change?

IELTS is a highly pressured exam. Candidates take the Reading (1 hour), Writing (1 hour) and Listening (40 minutes) papers in 1 morning, and then the Speaking in the afternoon. For many candidates, this is a tiring and stressful experience, especially as 7.0 requires test-takers to meet highly specific criteria they may not be aware of.

Indeed, many native speaker test-takers such as nurses from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US and Singapore fail to score 7.0 in all 4 papers without extensive training on exam techniques. One mistake, such as not including a particular structure in an essay, may mean that the candidate fails to achieve this score.

As a result, we frequently see nurses scoring 7.0 and above in 2 or 3 papers in 1 sitting, but not all 4 and therefore having to take the test again – and often with a similar result but not necessarily in the same papers. Their overall average score may well be 7.0 or more, but because of the 1 paper at 6.5, they still need to re-take the test, even though their English level is clearly advanced.

Is this a lowering of standards?

There are already press reports suggesting that this is a lowering of standards – see the [Daily Mail](#) and the [Daily Telegraph](#). Patient representatives express concern at a potential diminishment of language standards as Trusts try to recruit much-needed nurses from overseas.

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However, reading these responses, one wonders if the writers and commentators have even seen let alone taken an Academic IELTS test and whether they truly understand what nurses now have to achieve in order to work in the UK. There may be communicative issues in hospitals, but these are more than likely to be with EU nurses recruited before IELTS was introduced for them earlier this year.

Taking the combined results of 2 IELTS tests keeps the established standards. It also allows nurses to really focus on the academic English (not medical English) they need to achieve the 7.0 in the 1 or 2 papers they need in the second sitting. And remember, nurses still need to score 6.5 in all papers in both tests – the score typically required by universities for international students to join their degree programmes.

To Conclude

The new rules recognise the stressful conditions of the exam and have made a practical allowance which may de-stress the test for many nurses who have excellent levels of English but find exam pressure challenging. This shows that the NMC has listened to the multiple concerns of NHS Trusts, private healthcare organisations and medical recruitment specialists, and taken steps to address them. We at SLC have previously expressed scepticism on whether IELTS is the most suitable test for nurses – there is no Medical English component, for example – and so a little extra flexibility around a very difficult exam can only be a good thing.

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About SLC

[SLC](#) designs technical and business-focused digital language training programmes for an international market. We deliver courses where language skills make a critical difference to organisational and individual effectiveness and safety. SLC works extensively with medical professionals around the world, teaching Medical English and IELTS preparation programmes.



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