

IELTS AND OET

A BRIEFING PAPER FOR
HEALTHCARE TRAINING AND
RECRUITMENT PROFESSIONALS

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Introduction

Both IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and OET (Occupational English Test) are used to test the English language of healthcare professionals in different parts of the world.

They are chosen by regulatory bodies to ensure doctors, nurses and other professions have sufficient language skills to communicate at a high level with patients and colleagues, and so ensure safe and effective care.

This briefing looks at the two tests and compares them. As a result, healthcare training and recruitment professionals will be able to make better and more informed decisions when looking at which test is most appropriate for the health professionals they work with where the two options are available.

Similarities

There are a number of similarities between the two tests.

1. Each one consists of four sub-tests, one for each skill: reading, listening, writing and speaking.
2. A test takes place on one day.
3. There is no pass/fail, but a graded score – different institutions need test takers to achieve different scores, such as a 7 in IELTS or a B in OET. In the UK, for example, the GMC requires doctors to score B in OET with B in each paper, or IELTS 7.5 with a minimum 7.0 in each paper. The NMC requires nurses to score B in OET with B in each paper, or IELTS 7.0 with a minimum 7.0 in Reading, Listening and Speaking and 6.5 in Writing.
4. In practice, the required scores in the two tests for professions such as nurses are for similar levels of language skill when measured on the [Common European Framework of Reference](#), specifically a C1 or advanced level.
5. Both tests were developed in the late 1980s and are part-owned by Cambridge Assessment English. IELTS ownership is shared with IDP and the British Council. OET ownership is shared with Boxhill Assessment.

However, that's where the similarities end. As you will see, they are quite different tests in many ways.

Differences

Content

IELTS tests academic English – at least the version of IELTS used by Higher Education institutions and healthcare regulatory bodies around the world. This includes the ability to write essays, follow lectures, understand academic articles and discuss a wide range of topics, from the environment to education to social trends to cultural values.

OET tests healthcare English, including the ability to communicate effectively in medical scenarios, write a referral or discharge letter, understand a patient consultation, or follow a text taken from a medical journal.

Versions

IELTS offers 2 versions of the test – Academic as described, and General Training, used by organisations to test the more general language considered more appropriate for immigration or vocational purposes. The Listening and Speaking sections are the same for both. The Academic Reading and Writing is more geared to Higher Education than the General Training.

OET offers 12 versions of the test for different healthcare professions; nurses, doctors, dentists, pharmacists, optometrists, podiatrists, occupational therapists, vets, speech pathologists, dieticians, physiotherapists, and radiographers. The Reading and Listening sections are the same for both. The Speaking and Writing sections are tailored to the specific scenarios in which each profession uses English.



Format

IELTS Sub test	Content	Shows candidates can:
Listening (30 minutes)	4 recordings, 2 in an everyday social context, 2 in an academic context.	Understand main ideas and detailed factual information; understand the opinions, attitudes and purpose expressed by speakers; follow the development of ideas
Reading (60 minutes)	3 long texts from books, journals, magazines and newspapers. They may be descriptive and factual, discursive or analytical. Suitable for academic context.	Read for gist and main ideas; read for details; understand logical argument; recognise opinion, attitude and purpose
Writing (60 minutes)	Task 1 – write a report on data and/or information presented in a graph, table, chart or diagram. Min 150 words. Task 2 – write an essay in response to an opinion, argument or problem. Min 250 words.	Describe, summarise or explain information clearly and concisely; identify important and relevant information; write a well-organised overview; present a clear, well-organised argument; give evidence or examples; write in an accurate, formal style.
Speaking (11-14 minutes)	Part 1 – answer general questions about familiar topics such as home, work and studies. Part 2 – give a presentation of 2 minutes using prompts on a card. Part 3 – discuss abstract ideas and issues related to the topic in Part 2.	Communicate opinions and information on everyday topics; speak at length on a given topic, using relevant language and well-organised ideas; express and justify opinions; analyse, discuss and speculate about issues.





OET Sub test	Content	Shows candidates can:
Listening (50 minutes)	3 parts: Part A – extracts from two consultations between a professional and patient; Part B – six short workplace extracts, such as team briefings or handovers; Part C – two presentations from a healthcare professional. All are set in a general medical context suitable for all medical professionals to follow.	Follow and understand a range of health- and workplace-related spoken materials, inc patient consultations, colleague to colleague dialogues and lectures on aspects of healthcare.
Reading (60 minutes)	3 parts: Part A – four different but related short texts on a single topic; Part B – six short workplace texts; Part C – 2 long texts on general healthcare topics, suitable for all medical professionals	Read for gist, main ideas and opinion; read for details; understand different types of text on health- and workplace-related subjects, both professional and academic.
Writing (45 minutes)	Read case notes and write a letter, e.g. letter of referral or discharge. Topic is profession-specific, e.g. to nurses, doctors or dentists.	Expand notes into accurate, relevant sentences; write clearly and effectively on a health-related matter.
Speaking (20 minutes)	Part 1 – warm up interview on professional background Part 2 – two role plays on profession-specific scenarios. 2-3 minutes to prepare, then 5-minute role play on typical interaction between professional and patient.	Describe, explain and discuss real-life matters; provide structure to the conversation; gather information and give opinions and information sensitively; communicate effectively and accurately.

Preparation requirements

Preparing for IELTS involves learning huge amounts of vocabulary on a wide range of academic subjects so test takers are prepared to read academic texts quickly and effectively, understand lectures and discussions, talk about abstract questions and give opinions in detail. Test takers need to learn how to write reports on a variety of data and a range of essay types. Written texts need to be at an advanced level and so include complex structures and grammar. Learning a set of key exam techniques is also crucial.

Preparing for OET involves learning a wide range of healthcare-related and profession-specific language, so test takers are able to follow, engage with and participate in a variety of clinical scenarios, as well as understand medical texts and talks. They need to be able to write a healthcare-related letter, such as a referral letter, at an advanced level. They need to acquire a range of exam techniques so they can work quickly and effectively in the test.

As a result, preparation courses for the two tests follow very different pathways and use very different materials.

Scoring

IELTS is marked out of 9, with a separate score for each paper. Half marks are awarded as part of this. OET is graded from A (best) to E, with an equivalent numerical score to show more precisely where in the grade a candidate sits.

Healthcare regulatory bodies which use both exams to test English for healthcare professions tend to specify an advanced C1 level of language, i.e. around 7 in IELTS and a B in OET.

The score equivalencies between the two tests are as follows:

IELTS	OET	OET numerical score
8 - 9	A	450 - 500
7 - 7.5	B	350 - 440
6.5	C+	300 - 340
5.5 - 6	C	200 - 290
4 - 5	D	100 - 190
4	E	0 - 90

Recognition

IELTS is recognised by universities, regulatory bodies, immigration authorities and companies in many countries around the world. This includes universities in non-English speaking countries where a course may be delivered in English. There are over 1,100 test centres in over 140 countries.

OET is recognised by healthcare regulatory bodies and Higher Education healthcare educators, including those in the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Dubai, Ukraine and Namibia. There are over 115 test centres in 40 countries.

Numbers of test takers

Over 3 million people took IELTS in the past year, compared to the tens of thousands taking OET. This reflects the size and reach of the global Higher Education market on the one hand and the specialist nature of the OET on the other.

Preparation infrastructure

IELTS has a global infrastructure developed around preparing learners to take the test, including universities, specialist training organisations, private language schools, published materials, online content, and thousands of teachers and writers.

OET has a small but global preparation infrastructure, consisting of a growing number of specialist training providers and also a small but growing materials base. OET's Premium Preparation Provider scheme provides a framework for training organisations to undergo a rigorous accreditation process to demonstrate their ability to prepare candidates for the specialist nature of OET. SLC was the first provider to be accredited in Europe.

S L C Specialist Language Courses

SLC is the UK's leading provider of English language services to the global healthcare sector. We work with the UK's National Health Service, private healthcare groups, medical universities, nursing colleges and hundreds of medical professionals worldwide.

SLC provides a full portfolio of OET and IELTS preparation services.

- Assessment
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- Writing correction service

Contact us to find out more:

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✉ **enquiries@specialistlanguagecourses.com**



What organisations say about SLC's OET and IELTS preparation services

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“ABUHB has been extremely pleased with the English language tuition service provided by SLC. It has, in its entirety, met the requirements of the contract procured in a cohesive way.”

Dr. Lyn Middleton, Associate Director of Nursing, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board

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“We were delighted with the results achieved through SLC for our candidates undertaking the OET. It's proven to us that distance learning can be highly effective in supporting them to study and pass their English Language qualification and reducing the number of attempts and costs... We would recommend this training programme to all our hospital partners.”

Michael Joyce, Divisional Manager, King's Commercial, part of King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

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“Working in close partnership with SLC, our EU nurses at Cambridge (Addenbrookes hospital) benefit from the professional teaching, curriculum development, knowledge and individual care of tutors at SLC. The tutors care about the EU nurses meeting their potential.

The nurses tell us that they have good working relationships with their tutors, who help them to identify their learning needs, and then support them to achieve their English qualification as evidenced by the significant increases in our pass rates.”

Bronwyn Ramsay, Clinical Education Facilitator- Operational EU Lead, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

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