

Review of Recommended Two-year Limit on IELTS Validity: A Summary of Preliminary Internal Research

IELTS Research Group (January 2023)

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Abstract

Several high-stakes English proficiency tests suggest a two-year time limit on validity for score usage (IELTS; Pearson; TOEFL iBT). Although such timeframes provide a useful rule-of-thumb for identifying how recently a test was taken, adherence to such limits can have far-reaching consequences for individuals and institutions.

In this summary we share preliminary research which systematically collates and compares policies regarding test validity periods in five countries and three key sectors: higher education institutions (HEIs), medical regulatory bodies, and immigration authorities. An analysis of policy documentation was conducted using publicly available information from 90 universities and 18 medical regulators, plus four immigration authorities. This information was considered alongside qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with stakeholders.

Findings indicate that the recommended two-year validity period is overwhelmingly the norm, with only a few exceptions. Score users place trust in test developers and tend to

adopt recommendations as policy (cf. Hamid et al., 2019; O'Loughlin, 2011). The lack of variation in the two-year period taps into the 'equity vs. equality' dilemma observed by Lam et al. (2021) in the HEI context, and reinforces the value of fostering shared understanding for the basis of such recommendations (Pill and Harding, 2013).

Moving forward, we plan to work towards developing practical recommendations for communicating issues around test validity periods across different contexts of use, accounting for risks, responsibility, equity, and fairness. Further documentation of findings in the public domain is also planned to increase transparency around decision-making and reviewing existing IELTS policies.

Background and summary

IELTS, along with many other high-stakes English proficiency tests, have a recommended time limit on the use of test results, sometimes referred to as a validity period. For IELTS this is currently two years. This document summarises the results of initial internal investigations into the necessity and appropriate length of such a restriction, spurred by questions from stakeholder groups involved in professional certification and licensure for nurses. The imperative for this study is clear, as Bachman and Purpura (2008) remind us: language tests 'serve as both door-openers and gatekeepers'. With wide-ranging consequences for life chances and resource allocation on the basis of merit, test developers have a complex role to play in evaluating the impact of their decisions on a range of stakeholders.

The reported findings provide the groundwork for moving forward, and recommendations are made as to possible practical ways to tailor communication of validity issues surrounding the IELTS test across different contexts of use, accounting for risks and responsibility in each area.

The full internal report (planned for publication) presents the following strands of investigation:

A 'state-of-play' summary sets out current approaches to setting and handling score validity by major language testing organisations. This is divided into two camps: the recommended validity period (IELTS, TOEFL iBT, and Pearson) and the open validity approach (Cambridge Qualifications). Additionally, the increasing role of super-scoring

and one-skill retakes is considered since these score-use approaches implicitly endorse ongoing validity of one or more component parts of a test.

A literature review addresses some of the broader issues with respect to the relevance and length of validity periods in different contexts. This includes a summary of empirical research into L2 attrition, plus a summary of evidence garnered from repeat test-taking studies; both areas are, however, beset with methodological complications. There is limited mention in the literature to research that specifically addresses the rationale behind either fixed or open validity periods, with only Powers and Lall (2013) explicitly addressing the issue of validity periods in high-stakes language testing. Their paper provides retrospective justification for the two-year expiration policy on TOEFL. Although test providers may conduct internal research into this area, further transparency would now be welcomed. In the interim, no further studies have been carried out, indicating that the current investigations are long overdue in the language testing industry. The lack of a clear and robust methodological approach in both L2 attrition and repeat-testing research also impacts on the possibility for gathering generalisable findings relevant to test validity considerations.

Lastly, the report sets out findings from original research into current policy and practice with respect to IELTS validity periods. These investigations were carried out across three contexts of use: higher education institutions (HEIs), medical regulatory bodies, and immigration authorities. This involved a document analysis of test-score users' policies across five nations (UK, USA, New Zealand, Canada and Australia), followed by in-depth interviews with selected stakeholders from five UK-based HEIs and two regulators.

Key findings from original research

Higher Education Institutions	
Document research	In the vast majority of cases the recommended two-year validity period is observed. Not all institutions publicly mention this policy, but upon email enquiry

	<p>these institutions stated they observe the two-year validity period. More than half of the US institutions sampled do not list a validity period; in the UK, this lack of specificity is more common amongst lower-ranked universities. New Zealand and Australian universities seem to explicitly list the validity period most often.</p>
	<p>While it is clear that the recommended two-year validity period is the norm, there is some variation in its application. Most commonly, institutions require the test to be taken at most two years prior to the date of course commencement. In a smaller number of cases, a two-year maximum period between the test date and date of application was observed. In yet other cases, no explicit explanation was given as to the specific trigger date of the two-year validity period.</p>
In-depth interviews	<p>Interviews were conducted with personnel involved in admissions decisions at five UK universities during summer 2022. The roles of the interviewees were Postgraduate Admissions Manager, Deputy Head of International Student Recruitment, Undergraduate Admissions Manager, Compliance Manager and Head of English Language.</p>
	<p>All five interviewees were aware of the two-year validity period for IELTS and believed that this was common knowledge. They unanimously reported that this tends not to come up for discussion with colleagues, and that applicants generally do not challenge it. The two-year validity period tends to be a</p>

hard-and-fast rule as applied by the institutions, although there were two exceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic when access to tests was restricted. Four of the five interviewees reported that their admissions policies treat 'tests and qualifications differently', with school leavers' exams such as IGCSE, Singapore GCE-Level, French Baccalaureate and German Abitur falling into the qualifications category and having a longer validity period. Of particular interest to note is that none of the interviewees were aware that the IELTS validity period is a recommendation. On the whole, all five interviewees were reasonably satisfied with the two-year validity period. There was a feeling that such a policy is needed to support quick decision-making. A preference to follow a policy mandated by external experts was reflected in several participant comments. One other factor which arose when determining admissions guidelines was alignment with other institutions.

Further descriptive details and direct quotations from interview participants are given in the body of the full report.

Medical regulatory bodies

Document research

To obtain an overview of statutes regarding test validity periods for professional registration, publicly available information from a number of licensing bodies for healthcare-related professions (e.g. nursing,

midwifery, dentistry, chiropractic and physicians) in the five countries was analysed. Focusing on healthcare alone, rather than investigating regulators from different industries, facilitated analysis and observation of similarities and differences.

While the two-year validity recommendation is mostly adhered to by licensing boards in the healthcare domain, in some cases additional allowances are made. This does not follow any pattern as to greater or lesser leniency. A number of regulators are prepared to waive the stated policy in cases where, for example, the applicant for licensure has work experience in an English-speaking institution during the two-year period leading up to the application.

Additionally, several applications of 'super-scoring' of IELTS were found. For example, Australian licensing boards allow the combining of results from two test sessions provided these were sat within six months of each other. Both tests would still need to be dated within two years of filing the application for registration. The UK Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) similarly allows the combining of results from two sittings provided the tests were taken within six months of each other. The New Zealand Nursing Board meanwhile states that subpar results on one sitting may be compensated with component scores achieved on subsequent sittings within 12 months of the original test date.

In-depth interviews

Interviews were conducted with three employees of the NMC, namely two policy managers and a senior lawyer in the Registration and Investigations Team, plus a Registration and Advice Operations Manager from Social Work England (SWE).

In the case of SWE, the interviewee was aware of the two-year recommended validity period from IELTS but explained that SWE adopt a five-year validity period for all English language tests. She explained that SWE is a relatively new organisation and a recent consultation period led to revamped policies around English which are different to other regulators.

Meanwhile, the NMC adhere to the two-year validity period. One of the policy managers mentioned that they were not aware of any exemptions to the policy. However, the other policy manager and senior lawyer were able to provide some examples where some leniency had been applied via an appeals panel. It was emphasised that this type of exemption was not commonplace. The interviewees confirmed the test-combining policy which was evidenced in the document research. Applicants can combine component scores from two separate sittings of either IELTS or OET taken within a six-month period. This was introduced to add extra flexibility for those missing out on a single skill and for those who struggle with exam stress. It was informed by evidence seen at appeals panels. One policy manager highlighted the valuable nature of the lessons learnt at appeals panels for feeding

back into policy decisions. The overriding message from the NMC interviews was the need to consider the evidence in the context of the professional practice of the registrant. Similar to the HE sector, it was apparent that there is external pressure to align with other regulators.

Immigration Authorities

Document research

The UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand all accept IELTS results for immigration purposes, along with a selection of alternative tests, which differs somewhat between countries. Official US government sources are the least clear on language proficiency requirements for immigration, apart from stating that prospective immigrants sit a civic and language test, but no mention is made of which language tests serve this purpose.

The UK, New Zealand and Canada follow the two-year validity recommendation for language test results. Australia observes different validity periods depending on the level of English proficiency required for the different types of visas.

Findings and conclusion

The extent and variety of moderating variables involved in determining the validity of a test score over time make it difficult (and perhaps inadvisable) for test developers to provide fixed and definitive rules when advising stakeholders using test results for the various purposes described above. For this reason, the IELTS partners *recommend* two

years but advise test users to consider their own contexts of use. Findings from this study indicated that, regardless, the recommended two-year validity period is applied across most situations, with only a few exceptions – these mainly being among medical regulators. Overall, there is little contextual variation; test-score users place trust in the test developer and tend to adopt the official IELTS recommendation as policy (cf. Hamid et al., 2019; O’Loughlin, 2011).

Analysis of the interview transcripts hints at entrenched notions of expected uses for test scores and largely unquestioned application of the two-year period at both frontline and policy levels. This reinforces an important point with respect to the responsibility of test developers. It is not simply the content of recommendations regarding score use and interpretation that has to be considered, but also the quality of the communication and shared understanding of such recommendations (Pill and Harding, 2013).

Implications for IELTS

Overall, this research suggests that the two-year validity recommendation provides a good basis for framing the recency of IELTS test scores, and that most test users are happy to follow official guidance. However, some misconceptions regarding the origination of the two-year period came to light in the qualitative research. IELTS-endorsed documentation could be tailored to more explicitly address the recommended nature of the two-year validity period, and to offer further support in helping test users to define and understand their situational requirements in implementing this as policy. The full report provides suggestions for additional research with the aim of garnering a greater range of context-specific insights to inform future documentation.

Increasing such communicative resources would bolster the support that recognising organisations in each domain receive directly from the test developer. This is in keeping with the integrated argument-based approach to validation presented by Chalhoub-Deville and O’Sullivan (2020), who emphasise the importance of considering consequences for stakeholders, stressing the need to tailor communication for all intended user groups (Saville, 2009, Taylor, 2007).

Moving on and planned next phase of research

The immediate suggestion to arise from this report is to take a closer look at the possibilities of transforming the information about the requirements of each of the three contexts described above into more detailed practical considerations for the application of validity periods going forward. This would take account of the explicit needs in each domain identified in the stakeholder interviews as well as the context-specific stress points, and risks, that exist within each area. This suggestion is in line with the recommendations from Hamid et al. (2019) who propose that research on test-score attrition in different contexts is conducted so acceptable validity periods can be established.

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