

Annex E: Literature review

Language Testing using IELTS and OET: An update of the 2019 evidence review

Purpose of briefing

- 1 This report revisits a synthesis of English language testing among health and care regulators to inform our understanding of policy within the sector. The initial analysis was conducted in 2018 and was updated in 2019. The current update highlights changes since the 2019 review.

Background

- 2 The NMC recognises its duty to periodically review its registration processes to make sure they are in line with our regulatory requirements and that such processes remain fair to applicants.
- 3 Currently, the NMC requires that all professionals applying to join the register have the necessary knowledge of English to communicate clearly and effectively. The types of evidence the NMC accepts are as follows:
 - 3.1 Recent achievement of required scores in IELTS or OET
 - 3.2 A pre-registration nursing, midwifery or nursing associate qualification taught and examined in English, or;
 - 3.3 Recent practice of at least one year in a majority English speaking country.
- 4 The latest review of English language testing standards in the sector was completed in 2019 and is available [here](#). The present document is looking to revisit the questions answered during the 2019 review to identify possible changes to the approach of other regulators.
- 5 Analysis focuses only on changes since the last review. More specifically, the update revisits the following:
 - 5.1 What types of English language tests are accepted by UK healthcare regulators and majority English speaking regulators of nursing and midwifery?
 - 5.2 What are the minimum accepted IELTS and OET scores for those regulators?
 - 5.3 The equivalence of IELTS and OET
- 6 Some of the questions answered in the 2019 report were not revisited, as they were answered at that point and remain valid until today. Those questions are:

- 6.1 How do regulators decide on minimum requirements for IELTS/OET?
 - 6.2 How applicable is IELTS/OET to healthcare and nursing/midwifery?
 - 6.3 What have been the reported inequalities related to IELTS and OET?
 - 6.4 How valid are IELTS and OET test scores?
- 7 Findings are therefore presented under the following sections:
- 7.1 [Section 1: Summary](#)
 - 7.2 [Section 2: Which regulators accept IELTS and OET](#)
 - 7.3 [Section 3: What are the minimum required assessment pass scores?](#)
 - 7.4 [Section 4: Are IELTS and OET equivalent?](#)

Methods

- 8 The tables and information from the 2019 report were updated through desk research to bring them in line with March 2022. We visited the regulators websites and located their current English language requirements, as well as the IELTS and OET websites to identify any changes in the tests and their content.

Section 1: Summary

- 9 Both in the 2019 review and its current update, all nursing regulators across the world and healthcare regulators in the UK accept IELTS. Additionally, IELTS is accepted by all midwifery regulators globally, apart from the USA ones.
- 10 OET is gradually being accepted by more healthcare regulators in the UK and overseas. The General Pharmaceutical Council and some nursing regulators in the USA have been added to list.
- 11 IELTS and OET average minimum scores remain largely unchanged since 2019. One of the changes that is worth pointing out came from the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland that lowered the minimum required scores for both the IELTS and OET writing component, aligning with the ones NMC accepts.
- 12 Regulators of nursing in the USA accept lower scores for both IELTS and OET than the sector average. The lowest IELTS average score is accepted by the South African nursing regulator.
- 13 The IELTS average minimum score that NMC accepts aligns with most other nursing and midwifery regulators across the world, as well as with other healthcare regulators in the UK. 11 out the 15 regulators we looked at accept the same minimum average score (7.0), 2 require a higher one (7.5) and 2 require lower scores (6.0 and 6.5).
- 14 The OET scores that NMC accepts are mostly the same with the rest regulators that accept this test, although in writing we accept lower scores. More specifically:

- 14.1 For listening, the NMC requires the same minimum score (B) as 6 out of 8 regulators. The other two regulators require a lower score (C+).
- 14.2 For the reading component, the NMC requires a B, which is the same as 5 out of the 8 regulators. The remaining three require a C+.
- 14.3 Similarly, for speaking the NMC requires a B, as 5 of the 8 regulators. Two out of the remaining three require a C+ and one requires a C.
- 14.4 Lastly, the NMC requires a C+ in writing, aligning with 3 more regulators. The rest of the 5 regulators require a higher score of B.

Section 2: Which regulators accept IELTS and OET?

- 15 Analysis of regular standards has been split into two sections
 - 15.1 Language tests accepted by health and care regulators in the UK
 - 15.2 Language tests accepted by nursing and midwifery regulators globally
- 16 Differences in the information published in the tables since the last publication are highlighted in **gold**.

English language tests accepted by nursing and midwifery regulators across the world.

- 17 Table 1 below summarises the tests accepted by nursing and midwifery regulators in primarily English-speaking countries across the world.¹
- 18 Since 2019 and the last review, there have only been a couple of changes in the tests accepted by regulators in the USA.
 - 18.1 The Test of Spoken English (TSE) is no longer referenced by American regulators, as it has been superseded by the speaking portion of the test of English as a foreign language internet-based test (TOEFL iBT).
 - 18.2 OET is being accepted by some nursing regulatory bodies.²

Table 1 - Tests accepted by nursing and midwifery regulators across the world

Country	Nursing		Midwifery		Other
	IELTS	OET	IELTS	OET	
UK (NMC)	✓	✓	✓	✓	None
Ireland	✓	✓	✓	✓	None
Australia	✓	✓	✓	✓	The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia also

¹ Please note that we looked only at the countries that were involved in the previous versions of the review. We have not looked into the exhaustive list of countries the NMC accepts as majority English speaking countries.

² [Nursing Regulatory bodies \(NRBs\) are jurisdictional governmental agencies responsible for the regulation of nursing practice.](#) There are 59 NRBs in the US.

Country	Nursing		Midwifery		Other
	IELTS	OET	IELTS	OET	
					accepts TOEFL iBT and PTE Academic ³ .
New Zealand	✓	✓	✓	✓	None
Canada	✓	x	✓	x	Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN). For midwifery, there are provincial or territorial midwifery regulatory authorities and internationally trained midwives need to complete a Canadian bridging or gap training program approved or recognised by one of them. All of them accept IELTS.
USA	✓	✓ ⁴	x	x	TOEFL iBT ^{5,6}
South Africa	✓	x	✓	x	None

Note: Gold highlighted cells indicate changes since the 2019 review

English language tests accepted by health and care regulators in the UK

- The General Pharmaceutical Council revised its guidance to accept OET in 2021. Prior to that only the NMC and the GMC accepted it, as shown in table 2.
- The General Optical Council is the only UK healthcare regulator that still only accepts IELTS. The rest appear to be open in accepting other tests although OET is not clearly mentioned.

Table 2 – Tests accepted by UK healthcare regulators

Regulator	IELTS	OET	Other
Nursing and Midwifery Council	✓	✓	None
General Medical Council	✓	✓	None

³ In 2019, the [Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia \(NMBA\)](#) updated English language skills standards for all applicants for accredited nursing and midwifery programs.

⁴ [“Doctors and nurses applying for positions in the United States can now validate their English language proficiency with OET”. The test is accepted by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates|Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research \(ECFMG|FAIMER\), Florida Board of Nursing, Oregon State Board of Nursing and Washington State Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission.](#)

⁵ The American immigration process requires either IELTS or the TOEFL/TSE (Test of English as a Foreign Language/Test of Spoken English), which is a first step before obtaining employment.

⁶ In order to practice midwifery in the US, an individual must take a national certification exam. In order to take the exam, which is offered by the American Midwifery Certification Board (AMCB) and leads to the credential CNM or CM, the individual must have a graduate degree from a US midwifery education program that is accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Midwifery Education (ACME). This means that most midwives educated abroad will need to take at least one additional course from an ACME-accredited program. Once the individual has successfully passed the AMCB exam, they must then obtain a license from the state in which they intend to practice. Each state has a different licensing procedure (for more information, look [here](#)). In the language requirements mentioned in the information document for midwives educated abroad published by the American College of nurse-midwives (ACNM), only TOEFL is clearly mentioned (the document is fully accessible [here](#)).

Regulator	IELTS	OET	Other
General Dental Council	✓	may be considered	may be considered ⁷
General Pharmaceutical Council	✓	✓ ⁸	None
General Optical Council	✓	x	None
Health and Care Professions Council	✓	may be considered	may be considered ⁹
General Osteopathic Council	✓	may be considered	TOEFL, Cambridge English Language Assessment, and others provided that the score achieved is equivalent to C1 of the Common European Framework ¹⁰ .
General Chiropractic Council	✓	may be considered	TOEFL and others provided that the score achieved is equivalent to C1 of the Common European Framework.

Note: Gold highlighted cells indicate changes since the 2019 review

Section 3: What are the minimum required assessment pass scores?

21 In this section, we revisit the accepted scores of IELTS and OET. To showcase changes since the last publication we have highlighted changes in **gold**.

IELTS scores

22 In this section we revisit the IELTS scores accepted by nursing and midwifery regulators across the world and by healthcare regulators in the UK.

23 Most of the regulators listed in table 3, have not changed their IELTS score requirements since our last review. The only changes are:

23.1 The Irish regulator that has lowered the accepted scores for speaking and writing from 7.0 to 6.5

23.2 The American nursing regulator and the Canadian midwifery regulators were not previously included in the table and comparison and that is the reason why they are highlighted.

24 The NMC is aligned with the rest of the nursing and midwifery regulators across the world:

24.1 The midwifery regulator in New Zealand accepts a higher score than the NMC (7.5 vs 7.0), while the USA and South African regulators accept lower scores (6.5 and 6.0 respectively).

⁷ GDC state: "There are many ways in which an applicant may be able to satisfy us that they have the necessary knowledge of English for registration. If evidence other than those we have listed is provided they must meet the criteria we have set out i.e. the evidence must be robust, recent and readily verifiable by the GDC".

⁸ The General Pharmaceutical Council has revised its guidance on evidence of English language skills to include the Pharmacy Occupational English Language Test (OET) as evidence of English language competence.

⁹ HCPC states: "If you propose to rely upon a non-IELTS test score that is not listed below, it will be your responsibility to provide evidence that it is comparable to the requisite IELTS levels."

¹⁰ GOsC states: "Whilst any test demonstrating that you meet level C1 of the Common European Framework for Languages will be sufficient, the preferred testing system of the GOsC is the IELTS system".

24.2 For the writing component, the NMC accepts the same score as the Irish regulator (6.5), a higher score than the USA (6.0) but lower than Australian (7.0), New Zealand (7.0) and Canadian (7.0) regulators.

25 The average and writing component scores accepted by NMC for IELTS is also consistent with most other UK health regulators:

25.1 Only the GMC requires a higher average score (7.5 vs 7.0).

25.2 The writing score accepted by the NMC (6.5) is consistent with two regulators: the GDC and the HCPC. Four regulators accept a higher writing score (GMC, GPHc, GOSc, GCC at 7.0) and one accepts a lower writing score (GOC at 6.0).

Table 3 – IELTS test scores across regulators

Regulator	Overall (average)	Listening (minimum)	Reading (minimum)	Speaking (minimum)	Writing (minimum)
UK (NMC)	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	6.5
Ireland ¹¹	7.0	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5
Australia ¹²	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0
New Zealand (nursing)	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0
New Zealand (midwifery) ¹³	7.5	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0
Canada (nursing)	7.0	7.5	6.5	7.0	7.0
Canada (midwifery)	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0
USA (nursing) ¹⁴	6.5	6.0	6.0	6.0	6.0
South Africa	6.0	not stated	not stated	not stated	not stated
General Medical Council	7.5	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0
General Dental Council	7.0	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5
General Pharmaceutical Council	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0
General Optical Council	7.0	6.0	6.0	7.0	6.0
Health and Care Professions Council ¹⁵	7.0	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5
General Osteopathic Council	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0

¹¹ Overall IELTS score of 7.0 with a minimum of 7.0 in any three components and 6.5 in any one component.

¹² Scores needed from one sitting – see standard. Two sittings are acceptable, within 6 months of one another, but in each sitting an overall minimum of 7.0 is needed, each component must be 7.0 across the two sittings, and no component should be below 6.5.

¹³ The Midwifery Council of New Zealand asks for an overall pass score of no less than 7.5, with no less than 7 in any of the four bands.

¹⁴ Band score result of 6.5 overall with a minimum of 6.0 in any one module (Resource Manual on the Licensure of Internationally Educated Nurses, (2015) NCSBN, p.12, last accessed 24/02/22)

¹⁵ Excludes speech and language therapists – higher scores are needed - overall 8.0, and 7.5 for the four language skills as communication is deemed a core professional skill for these roles (and these requirements are written into their professional Standards of proficiency).

Regulator	Overall (average)	Listening (minimum)	Reading (minimum)	Speaking (minimum)	Writing (minimum)
UK (NMC)	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	6.5
General Chiropractic Council	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0

Note: Gold highlighted cells indicate changes since the 2019 review

OET Scores

- 26 In this section we revisit the OET scores accepted by nursing and midwifery regulators across the world and by healthcare regulators in the UK.
- 27 There are a few additions in the regulators included in table 4, as more American nursing regulators have started accepting OET.
- 28 The OET scores accepted by the NMC are consistent with most of the by nursing and midwifery regulators across the world and by other healthcare regulators in the UK. More specifically:
- 28.1 For listening, reading and speaking, the scores accepted by the NMC are the same with most regulators. Ireland accepts a lower score for reading and speaking (C+ vs B), while two federal regulators in the USA (Florida and Washington) accept lower scores for listening, reading (C+ vs B) and speaking (Florida C+ vs B, Washington C vs B).
- 28.2 For the writing component, the score accepted by the NMC is consistent with two USA federal regulators (Washington and Florida) and Ireland. Other regulators in the UK and internationally accept higher scores (Australia, New Zealand, USA GMC, GPhC require a B vs C+)

Table 4 – OET scores across nursing and midwifery regulators (and GMC)

Regulator	Listening (minimum)	Reading (minimum)	Speaking (minimum)	Writing (minimum)
Nursing and Midwifery Council	B	B	B	C+
Ireland ¹⁶	B	C+	C+	C+
Australia	B	B	B	B
New Zealand (nursing & midwifery)	B	B	B	B
GMC	B	B	B	B
General Pharmaceutical Council	B	B	B	B
USA (ECFMF, Oregon State Board of Nursing) ^{17,18}	B	B	B	B

¹⁶ The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland as for OET with Grade B in three components and C+ in one component.

¹⁷ To meet ECFMG's requirements, applicants must attain a minimum score of 350 (Grade B) on each of the four measured sub-tests of OET Medicine (Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking) in one test administration.

¹⁸ Oregon State Board of Nursing requires a B in all categories.

Regulator	Listening (minimum)	Reading (minimum)	Speaking (minimum)	Writing (minimum)
USA (Florida Board of Nursing) ¹⁹	C+	C+	C+	C+
USA (Washington State Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission) ²⁰	C+	C+	C	C+

Note: Gold highlighted cells indicate changes since the 2019 review

Section 4: Are IELTS and OET equivalent?

- 29 In table 5 we are presenting the differences between IELTS and OET tests since the last review. To draw attention to the changes, we have highlighted them in gold.
- 30 In terms of similarities, both tests:
- 30.1 assess people’s abilities in listening, reading, speaking and writing
 - 30.2 ask participants to articulate their own opinions both in writing and speaking
 - 30.3 require answers in different formats.
- 31 The main difference between the two English competence tests is the context in which questions are set. OET is specifically designed for healthcare professionals and uses examples reflecting real-life workplace tasks, whereas IELTS is based on general social interactions with examples from everyday life.
- 32 Moreover, we can see some changes that have happened within the last few years in both IELTS and OET. Starting with the changes in IELTS:
- 32.1 In the listening component, there are more types of formats used to assess people’s understanding; previously only multiple-choice and gap filling formats were used.
 - 32.2 In the reading component, there are also different and more types of formats used (previously the formats used were solely multiple choice, gap-filling, heading matching and true/false options). Additionally, the topics on which the tasks of the reading component are based are not only generic, but for two of them focus on social and workplace survival.
 - 32.3 The speaking section of the IELTS exam has remained unchanged.
 - 32.4 Lastly, in the writing component people sitting the test are no longer asked to interpret information on graphs, diagrams or tables. Instead, they are presented with a situation and are requested to write a letter about it.
- 33 Looking at the changes in the OET exam:

¹⁹ A minimum score of 300 on the Occupational English Test (OET).

²⁰ The Washington State Nursing requires a minimum score of 300 in listening, reading and writing, and a minimum score of 280 in speaking.

- 33.1 The listening component now comprises of three instead of two parts and includes a short workplace extract and a presentation on top of a consultation. Previously a monologue was the second part of the listening component, but it has now been dropped. The format of this section has also changed to include multiple choice questions as well as gap filling one.
- 33.2 The reading component has also expanded to include three instead of two tasks.
- 33.3 The speaking and writing sections have remained unchanged.

Table 5 - Key differences between IELTS and OET components

Component	IELTS ²¹	OET
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two conversations (one paired, one in a group) about social needs - Two information-giving monologues (e.g. a lecture) - Various formats: multiple-choice; matching lists with options; labelling plans/maps/diagrams; gap-fill; sentence completion; short-answer questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Three parts based on a consultation between patient and health professional, and a short workplace extract and a presentation - Requires a gap fill and multiple-choice answer formats.
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Three tasks based on i) 'social survival', ii) 'workplace survival', iii) 'general reading' - Various formats: multiple-choice; identifying information; identifying views/claims; matching information; matching headings/features/sentence endings; sentence completion; summary completion; labelling diagrams; short-answer questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Three tasks relating to health topics, using gap-fill answers; multiple choice; matching and short answer questions
Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Questions about personal background (e.g. hometown, schooling, hobbies) - Give personal opinion on selected topic, with prompts of what to cover - Talk about the topic above in more detail, exploring more abstract ideas and issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nursing specific - Two role play discussions with mock patient/carer - Assessing skills such as intelligibility; fluency; appropriateness of language; grammar and expression; relationship-building; understanding perspective; structure; information-gathering and information-giving
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presented with a situation and asked to write a letter requesting information about it (e.g. writing to a renting agency about heating problems) - Write short essay giving opinion on a generic subject. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nursing specific - Write a referral letter for a patient using data from patient notes - Assessing skills such as: purpose; content; conciseness and clarity; genre and style; organisation and layout; language

Note: Gold highlighted cells indicate changes since the 2019 review

²¹ Baghaei, S; Mohammad S.B; Yamini, M. (2021) [Learning Objectives of IELTS Listening and Reading Tests: Focusing on Revised Bloom's Taxonomy](#), Research in English Language Pedagogy (RELP)