

For many language travellers intending to study at a university, a language certificate is required for entry. Other students decide to take a recognised exam to improve their employment markets at home. Increasingly, certification for university entry and the employment market is evolving accordingly. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

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Two key factors are driving demand for language exams: first, the desire for a university or college education overseas; and second, employment. As Jackie Martin, Director of Studies at Suzanne Sparrow Plymouth Language School in the UK, notes, 'It is becoming very rare for students to do an exam purely out of personal reasons. It is becoming more and more necessary to prove your level of [a language] by holding an internationally recognised certificate.'

English at the top

There is no doubt that English language exams dominate the market. Exams such as IELTS and TOEFL, which are used by universities in the UK, Australia, New Zea-

University or college overseas, a language exam grade is
recognised language exam to give them an advantage in their
career. English is becoming the global passport to success and the

Exam advantage

land, Ireland, the USA and Canada for entrance requirements, are taken by over 900,000 candidates from around the world each year. Apart from university entrance exams, there are others, such as the Jet/Set exams by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, Pitman and Trinity exams, and the giant of the market, the Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages (Esol) exams from the University of Cambridge Esol (formally known as Ucles).

'Our most popular exam is the FCE,' reports Sheena Brown of Linguaviva Centre in Ireland. 'It continues to be one of the most recognised external exams in main European countries, and in Spain in particular.'

Demand for certain exams is linked to student nationalities, depending on the recognition they enjoy in a particular country. Veronika Vodicová of Asiana/Study International agency in the Czech Republic, reports that Cambridge Esol courses are most popular among their students - about 15 per cent of clients take this kind of course. 'The demand for preparation courses as well as other language courses is increasing - this trend bears out the fact that the English language is generally considered to be more and more important in a professional career,' she says. Soledad Gómez Fernandez from EEC Study in Spain, says that FCE is their most popular exam and demand is up by about 10 per cent.

In Russia, Sergey Serov, Managing Director of Ya Language School, reports that the Pitman test is number-one among their students. 'Pitman tests, which might be considered as the most popular

exam in our region, are preferable when applying for a job because it gives a favourable position to the candidate,' he explains.

As destinations attract different student nationalities, trends in demand for certain exams also change. For example, Stephanie Lowe, Director of Studies at Kiwi English Academy in New Zealand, says that as more Europeans have studied in New Zealand, the number of Cambridge Esol exam takers has risen. Overall, however, it is the IELTS exam that is the most popular at their school, as it is needed for university entrance in New Zealand and Australia.

Academic motivation

With the growing need for academic entrance language exams, some sources report that demand for Cambridge Esol exams is being eroded. 'The demand for Cambridge Esol exams has dropped slightly, although FCE remains the most popular,' says Martin at Suzanne Sparrow Plymouth Language School. 'Many students now require IELTS if they want to go on to further or higher education in the UK and demand for this exam has increased greatly.'

Similarly, Tessa Wyllie, Principal of West Sussex School of English in the UK, says that more of their students are taking IELTS, but not only for academic reasons. She claims that many employers prefer IELTS as they think it is more 'academic' in nature. 'Most of our students believe that the Cambridge Esol suite of exams are better tests of their knowledge of the language but IELTS is increasingly recognised as a well known benchmark,' she says.

The opening up of the Chinese market, in particular, has been driving demand for both Ielts and Toefl in some countries. Allison Lau at the School of English at Queen's University in Canada, reports, 'There has been a huge increase in Chinese students. A huge percentage of them are interested in Toefl and studying for it because

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Exam developments

Even the established exam boards are far from complacent about their range of tests, with many of the major English language exams being tweaked to ensure they meet the needs of today's test taker. Peter Giesinger of IDP Australia, which jointly administers Ielts with the British Council and the University of Cambridge Esol, reports that a new speaking form of Ielts has been launched this year, while revisions to the writing test are currently underway. In addition, the Ielts partners are

planning to introduce computer-based testing for Ielts some time this year.

But it is Toefl that is undergoing the biggest overhaul. This March, ETS launched a new Toefl Academic Speaking Test (Tast), which will eventually be integrated into the standard Toefl product. 'In 2004, ETS will begin unveiling the next generation of Toefl,' reports Mari Pearlman. 'It will reflect millions of dollars in research and worldwide field trials undertaken to identify the best way to build and assess the communicative English skills

test takers need at university level and in their professional careers.' ETS aims to make the new test as relevant as possible. 'Students may be asked to listen to a college lecture and then write about it, or they may be asked to read material and then speak about it in English,' says Pearlman.

ETS also plans to introduce a new scoring system. Instead of one overall score, candidates will receive four sub-scores, one for each skill area. The company has also introduced a new test, Tope, this year, which is specifically for business

they all seem to want to attend a Canadian university programme very badly.' She continues, 'I think exam preparation geared towards university programmes - professional, graduate to undergraduate - is where it's at right now.' In New Zealand, Lowe adds, 'The demand for Ielts will continue as the number of Asian students increases. The two factors go hand in hand.'

The total number of Ielts test takers has also been pushed up by the fact that, since 2001, the exam is required by student visa applicants from some countries for entry into Australia. In 2001, the number of Ielts candidates stood at 213,000, up by over 40 per cent on the previous year.

This, coupled with the adverse economic climate in some countries, has had another effect on the market: many students who may have taken an exam overseas are now doing so at home. '[We have experienced a] slight decrease in the number [of students] sitting exams in the UK at the end of a course. Several students come to us to do some preparation with the intention of taking the exams at home,' confirms Wyllie.

'Most of our potential clients - those who want to take any of the language exams - prefer to [save some] money by taking a preparation course and the exam itself here in Russia at the local British Council office,' agrees Irina Radyushkina, Manager of Petro-Lingua agency in Russia.

Similarly, Su Xiaoxun from Jiangsu Provincial International Exchange Centre in China, reports that, although 50 per cent of their students take an exam preparation course, because it is 'useful when applying to a university', the number has actually decreased by 20 per cent in recent years because more institutions in China now offer

Ielts and Toefl, which makes it much cheaper and easier for students to sit the exam at home.

Toeic on the up

According to Mari Pearlman, Vice President of the Teaching and Learning Division at US-based ETS, which administers the Toefl exam, around 700,000 students take Toefl each year, although demand has been 'steady' in recent years. With many US language providers experiencing a dip in student numbers since September 2001, Toefl numbers have also stagnated. Steve Bosak, an independent education consultant in the USA, reports that 99 per cent of his clients take an exam preparation course and the most popular exam is Toefl. However, he says, 'Clients have decreased in the last years.'

Christine Schmidl, Principal of New Horizon College of English in New Zealand, says they stopped offering Toefl as its popularity declined. Instead, the college has set up a Toeic preparation course. 'We decided to offer the Toeic exam because it is very important for students from Korea and Japan,' she says. 'The big companies over there require a high Toeic score from their employees.'

Laura Robinson, Director of Studies at Sunshine Coast English College in Australia, says that they, too, are developing a Toeic preparation course. 'It is my impression that increased competition for employment has fuelled the growth of demand for FCE in Europe and Toeic in East Asia. Most students say that a language qualification will help them to find a better job at home.'

At ATC Language & Travel in Ireland, Toeic is the number-one exam among their adult students, while Trinity exams are most popular among their juniors. According to Nicola Carroll, Director

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of Studies at the school, ToEIC is valuable to those looking for employment as it provides a 'can do' list for employers to see what each candidate should be able to do with their score in the test'.

Suzanne Sparrow Plymouth Language School in the UK recently became a ToEIC testing centre. Explaining their reasons behind this

decision, Martin says, 'This exam is required by many French companies to demonstrate the level of an employee's English.'

There are also exams aimed at business professionals, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry exams and Cambridge ESOL's BEC, but generally speaking, they are most popular with students who want to increase their employability, rather than those already in employment. Wyllie speaks for many language providers when she says, 'Our business English clients do not require a qualification. They are more interested in developing proficiency.'

Lowe believes that this might be a growth area for New Zealand in the future, while Renate Schmid, of Cultura Wien in Austria, says of executives wanting to learn German, 'In our experience, [they] often have a much lower language proficiency than generally expected so they are far away from being able to sit [an exam].'

executives. ToEIC, which is also aimed at business people and is currently taken by some 2.5 million people each year, only tests reading and listening.

Trinity Colleges London in the UK has also introduced a new exam. Its ISE suite is a four-skill exam which, according to Brian Cooper, Trinity Marketing Manager (Language), encourages the use of IT. 'With the introduction of the four-skills ISE exam, users of Trinity no longer need to turn to other [exam] boards to obtain their written English qualifications,' he says. All Trinity exams are

aligned to the Common European Framework, which makes them 'valid, relevant and transportable across borders, particularly in the European context'.

There is an ever increasing number of English language exams, but is the market already saturated? The experience of Ireland's TIE exam would appear to indicate that there is room for more. Only currently available in Ireland, TIE has, according to Sue Hackett, Project Director at the Advisory Council of English Language Schools

(Acels) in Ireland, 'continued to expand in terms of candidate numbers for both the junior and post-secondary formats since it was launched in 2000'.

TIE recently received official recognition in Italy. 'One of the effects of this has been the morale boost for Irish [English language schools] from such a major vote of confidence in the recognised sector,' says Hackett. 'This has also had the effect of generating enormous interest from Italy as learners can now use the test for their *credito formativo* [school credits].'

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Other languages

While English language exams remain the most popular in the marketplace, demand for exams in some other languages is also picking up pace. 'More and more students decide to take exams, especially at the intermediate and advanced level, since employers from all over

the world appreciate knowledge being well documented,' reports Kay Hug at the Goethe Institut in Germany.

In Europe, the Association of Language Testers in Europe (Alte) developed the Common European Framework of language exams to enable the direct comparison of exams in various languages. For example, the language level of CAE in English is equivalent to ZMP in German.

The necessity to speak multiple foreign languages within the European Union (EU) has fuelled demand for many diverse European language exams, and with the planned enlargement of the EU, this is likely to continue, argues Schmid. 'Citizens of countries [that are going to] become part of the EU do not solely rely on their knowledge of a foreign language, but they are aware that - in our times of a common European educational framework - they need an official diploma that is recognisable everywhere in Europe,' she says.

Key to language exam acronyms in this feature

English

IELTS	International English Language Testing System
BEC	Business English Certificate
FCE	First Certificate in English
CAE	Certificate in Advanced English
Toefl	Test of English as a Foreign Language
Toefc	Test of English for International Communication
Tope	Test of Professional English
ISE	Integrated Skills in English
TIE	Test of Interactive English
Celpip	Canadian English Language Proficiency

Index Programme

ISLPR	Int. Second Language Proficiency Ratings
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Chinese

HSK	Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi
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French

Delf	Diplome d'Etudes en Langue Française
Dalf	Diplome Approfondi de Langue Française

German

TestDaF	Test Deutsch als Fremdsprache
ZMP	Zentrale Mittelstufenprüfung

ZdfB

ZdfB	Zertifikat deutsch für den Beruf
PWD	Prüfung Wirtschaftsdeutsch International
DHS	Deutsche Sprachprüfung für den Hochschulzugang ausländischer Studierender

ÖDS

ÖDS	Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch
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Italian

Cils	Certificato di Italiano come Lingua Straniera
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Spanish

Dele	Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera
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The desire for some official certification of language level has boosted demand for the Dele exam preparation course at Al-Andalus in Spain, where around 10 per cent of students take such a programme annually. 'We suppose [demand has increased] because students wish to have official recognition about their [language] knowledge,' says Josefa Almoguera Sanchez at the school.

The Chinese language exam, HSK, is also benefiting from the need for certification for language proficiency. In 2002, HSK was taken by around 144,000 candidates, up by almost 40 per cent on the previous year's enrolment figure. Initially, most foreigners took HSK because they wanted to study in China. Now, the main reason for students - who are mostly from South Korea, Japan and the USA - taking the exam is because they want to work in China, and this trend has increased since China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2002.

In other parts of Europe, however, demand is inconsistent. The main exams in France are the Delf and DalF exams (the latter is for

university entrance). In 2002, demand for both these exams at Alliance Française Toulouse was so low that they were unable to run the courses. And in Italy, the Cils exam is still predominantly taken by immigrants who want to work in Italy, while language travellers generally take an Italian course for pleasure and recreation only.

German demand

In Germany, however, the picture is somewhat different. 'About 30 per cent of all course participants take [an] exam during their stay at one of our institutes in Germany,' reports Hug. The Goethe Institut has developed a whole raft of exams, with the newest members of the family being Start 1 and Start 2, which are aligned to the Common European Framework. The most well known exams include PWD, ZdfB (business German exams), DSH and TestDaF. The latter two can be used as proof of language proficiency for access to German universities, an option which is becoming increasingly popular as university education in Germany is free to all students.

In Austria, too, demand for the ÖDS diploma, which is required by students who want to study at an Austrian university, has grown in recent years. 'The exam is most popular with students from Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia, the Ukraine, Croatia and Italy,' reports Schmid. 'We have created the 'speed preparation course' of 10 lessons because people with a good command of German [who do not need language tuition] can have better results if they see the type of exam [questions] before.'

Seizing on another niche in the exam market, Cultura Wien offers preparation courses for the *Közepfok*, the official Hungarian



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state exam for foreign languages. A good pass in this exam counts towards the total number of points students need to get into university in Hungary. 'If the prospective student is in possession of the *Kozepfek*, this means extra points for his/her total score, so it has become practically obligatory to pass this exam in order not to lower your chances for entry to university,' explains Schmid.

Exam diversification

Language exams have become highly prized assets in today's market - and this has led to some highly publicised cases of exam fraud. Last year, around 60 students were arrested in the USA after it was discovered that they had paid professional test takers to take their Toefl tests so they could extend their student visas. In Australia, a counterfeit operation was foiled when a police raid found materials for the forgery of Toefl scorecards, Ielts documents and Department of Immigration seals.

While exam boards are constantly developing measures to stop such practices, the actual validity of their exams has also been questioned by some. Last year, the University of Canterbury in New Zealand found that almost 17 per cent of its international students lacked basic writing skills. Some of these students had obtained an Ielts score of 6.0, which is required for university entrance. Like many other universities in English-speaking countries, the University of Canterbury has now introduced an additional testing programme.

There has been a certain amount of diversification in the market towards more specific exams. Canada recently developed its own English test for immigration purposes, called Celpip. Launched in China this year, Celpip aims to provide a more Canada-biased alternative to the previously used Ielts test.

Sunshine Coast English College in Australia offers a preparation course for ISLPR, an exam developed by Griffin University in Australia, and used in Queensland for immigration purposes and placing international students into state high schools. 'It's also used as a back-up exam for entrance to Griffin University and our local Tafes, after Ielts,' explains Robinson. 'ISLPR tests speaking, listening, reading and writing, but in a less academic and more subjective way than the Ielts exam.'

There is no doubt that the trend towards language exams will continue, with the main English language exams being increasingly joined by officially recognised exams in other languages and more targeted specific English language exams. For agents and consultants, the challenge is to stay up to date with developments in the exam sector, so they are able to advise clients of the best options available. □