

Put to the test

Internationally recognised language exams are highly important in today's market and exam administrators are constantly developing their products to ensure they meet consumer demand. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

With a continued emphasis in the international employment market on globally recognised qualifications, demand for language exams – particularly those that assess English language skills – is rising. At the Central Tafe in Perth, Western Australia, for example, up to 20 per cent of international students now take such an exam. The reason behind this, says Penny Glanville at the institution, is that “students are no longer content to have a certificate from the college alone”.

This is not the only appeal of exam preparation programmes, argues Ian Pratt at Sunshine Coast English College in Noosa Heads, QLD, Australia. “Much of the attraction of these programmes to students, in many cases beyond even that of achieving exam results, is the sense of quality attached to exam courses,” he says. “There is no doubt that exam courses attract high

“ielts has become far more popular due to students wanting to go to British university, but also the convenience of the frequency you can take the exams”

achieving teachers, and this may be reflected in students' perception of delivery results.”

Angie Hultberg at Cape Studies Language School in Cape Town, South Africa, observes that students also take exam courses for other reasons. “For example, to study further. English has become the global community language and therefore the demand is on all levels.”

Toefl v ielts

For academic purposes, the main exam choices are Toefl and ielts. Toefl, which is

taken by around 750,000 candidates annually, is generally favoured as an entry criterion at North American universities. However, Tom Ewing, Director of Public Relations at ETS, which administers Toefl, stresses that the test is recognised by more than 5,200 colleges and universities in 90 countries. “This gives students a great deal of options and flexibility, which is very important to them,” he says.

ielts is also widely accepted by institutions around the world, and according to Sujata Saikia at the British Council – which jointly manages the test with Cambridge Esol and IDP Australia – ielts has been “one of the fastest-growing tests in the world”. The number of candidates has soared from around 30,000 in 1995 to over 500,000 in 2004. This trend towards ielts is borne out by the experiences of many institutions. “ielts has become far more popular due to students wanting to go to British university, but also the convenience of the frequency you can take the exams and the speed with which you receive the results,” says Vic Stephenson at EF in the UK.

Turkish agent, Ture Ozer at Edcon Education Consultancy, agrees that, although Toefl is the most popular exam, ielts is becoming better known in Turkey and, as a result, its popularity is growing.

In Canada and the USA, ielts is a relative newcomer for many institutions, which have traditionally favoured Toefl, and this is still the case for many. For example, Green River Community College in Auburn, WA, USA, offers only Toefl preparation. “As a community college specialising in university transfer, our students do not need a wider range of tests”, argues Ross Jennings, Executive Director of International Programmes at the college.

In Canada, Jeff Romonko, Director of Studies at IH Vancouver, says Toefl and Toefl have been most popular at their institution “due to the fact that these exams are big in Asia, where many of our students have come from”. However, the school now offers ielts classes. “The reason for this is that ielts is now used by Immigration Canada as a means to measure the English proficiency of prospective immigrants,” he explains.

IH Vancouver is not alone in branching into ielts preparation courses. According to Saikia, there has been a “dramatic increase in ielts recognition in the USA”. Currently, around 700 institutions in the USA recognise ielts, including seven of eight Ivy League universities.

Wider choices

Toefl and ielts aside, there is a whole string of other English

Other language exams

Demand for internationally recognised exams in languages other than English is also growing. Julia Alimochkina of Litera Scripta Manet agency in Russia says that as well as ielts and Toefl programmes, they also offer exam courses for the French

Delf and DalF, Germany's Test DaF and the Spanish Dele exam. “The most popular [non-English] exam preparation courses are in Delf/DalF, usually taken in France. French is the second most popular language in Russia,” Alimochkina explains.

According to Marc Melin, Director of the Centre International d'Etudes Françaises (Cidef) at Université Catholique de l'Ouest in Angers, France, increasing numbers of international students are requesting to take Delf and DalF exams, which

are required for university entrance. “Demand has increased with the arrival of Chinese students who have to enter a French university after their studies at Cidef,” he reports.

Cidef offers a range of other French language exams including a selec-

tion from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Paris (CCIP) and the Alliance Française (AF) exams. “AF exams used to be the most popular but they have declined during the past 10 years,” relates Melin.

Eleri Maitland at French in Normandy in Le

language exams that set out to meet market requirements. Toeic, which tests communication skills, is another major player. According to Ewing, it is taken by 4.5 million candidates annually. "The Toeic test has become recognised as a valuable management tool that enables organisations to evaluate English language competence almost anywhere in the world," he says.

Another prominent range of exams is the Cambridge suite, which includes a wide selection of exams for international students at all abilities, as well as exams designed for young learners and business professionals. "Approximately 1.5 million candidates in 135 countries, including the UK, sit our exams each year," states Stephen McKenna, Assistant Director (Marketing) at Cambridge Esol Examinations. "The most popular exams remain FCE and IELTS, with rapid growth in the candidature for young learners and business-focused exams."

Other English language exams include the Trinity range, London Chamber of Commerce (LCCI) and City and Guilds Pitman. Many of these encompass a whole raft of language exams to suit various needs.

Trends in demand

Particular nationalities can often favour a certain exam product. "Asian students, particularly the Chinese, the Japanese and the Koreans, are the ones who are most interested in taking the IELTS exam," relates Kathy Bowles at Lewis School of English in Southampton, UK, "and the Koreans and Japanese make up most of the number of Toeic [candidates], although recently we have had more French, German and Polish students interested."

The Cambridge exams have traditionally been popular with Western Europeans, and Romonko in Canada observes, "As our school has begun to attract more students from Europe, we have seen an increase in students preparing for the Cambridge exams."

Meanwhile, James Cook University English Language Centre in Cairns, Australia has witnessed a "rapid decline" in demand for the Cambridge exams, which Director of Studies, Clive Parker, attributes to lower numbers of Swiss students. "We will no

longer offer Cambridge programmes from 2006 as the demand has been very low," he notes. Stephenson at EF agrees that they have experienced a trend away from other Cambridge Esol exams towards IELTS. "Students may be put off the Cambridge exams as they can only take them three times [in] the year, the exam is increasingly expensive, and students have to wait two months for the results," she says. "The IELTS board, by contrast, is offering more sessions per year, the exam can be taken on one day, rather than spread over three sessions, and the results are back within two weeks. The price has not increased significantly over the last couple of years and its reputation seems to be growing."

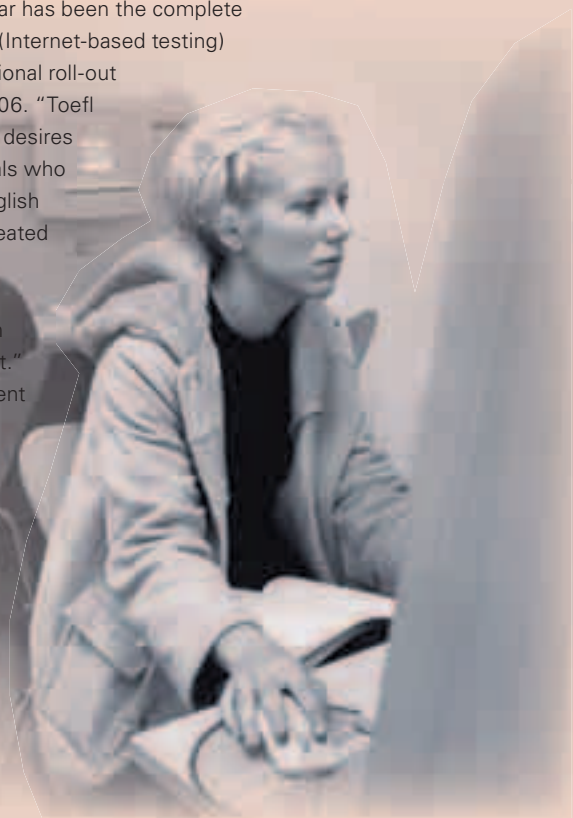
Evolving exams

The secret of success in the exam world is certainly to listen to market demand. According to Glyn Jones, Product Manager at City and Guilds, they introduced the Spoken English Test for Business "in response to a recognition that speaking is a critical skill in international business and yet very few public examinations concentrate on this aspect". In 2005, Trinity College London reacted to demand for exams that test lower language ability by launching an additional level of its Integrated Skills in English exam.

But the most significant change this year has been the complete re-design of Toefl. In September, Toefl iBT (Internet-based testing) was launched in the USA, with the international roll-out of the exam scheduled during 2005 and 2006. "Toefl was changed in response to the needs and desires of admissions officers and university officials who wanted a better measure of a student's English proficiency," states Ewing. "Those tests treated English communication – reading, writing, speaking and listening – as if it embodied separate tasks. English, however, is used in an integrated manner. Toefl iBT reflects that."

Computer-based testing is a development that most exam administrators are now offering. Computer-based IELTS has been rolled out to 10 countries so far. However, in IELTS' case, the pen and paper test will remain to "give students the choice", says Saikia. City and Guilds, too, is introducing some online testing and Jones believes this, together with other candidate-centred characteristics, will be the key to success in the future. Summing up, he says, "On-demand and online testing with the possibility of immediate feedback of results will come into its own."

"Those tests treated English communication – reading, writing, speaking and listening – as if it embodied separate tasks. English, however, is used in an integrated manner"



Petit Quevilly, France, says that they favour exams linked to the Common European Framework, and this has prompted the school to offer the French version of the business exam, Bulats. "There is an increasing awareness in Europe that we now have a

language definition system in the Common European Framework, and so many are turning to Bulats," says Maitland. "It makes training managers' jobs much easier as it gives more details of results than Toeic."

In Italy, the main exam is the Cils, which is admin-

istered by the University for Foreigners in Siena. Carlo Lipparini at Istituto il David in Florence reports, "Every year we receive more and more requests for the Cils exam as it becomes more well known abroad." Even so, only two per cent of the institute's

total annual students take the exam.

In Germany, the Test DaF is accepted for university entrance, and demand has grown in recent years. However, Joana Meenken at F+U Academy in Heidelberg, Germany, reports that their most popular

exam is the DSH for high school students. She says these are popular with all nationalities, "especially Israelis, Italians and students from Eastern Europe, because we have extraordinarily good contacts and agencies in these countries."