



Specialist Language Courses

GETTING CANDIDATES TO IELTS 7.0

A GUIDE FOR TRAINING AND RECRUITMENT
PROFESSIONALS IN UK HEALTHCARE

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Section 1: IELTS – An Overview

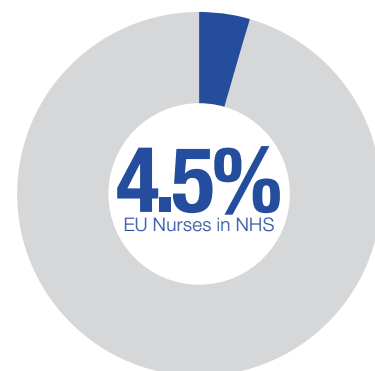
What is IELTS?

The Academic IELTS English test was developed in the late 1980s. It is an academic English test originally designed for students who wish to study in English speaking universities at either degree or postgraduate level. The language covered includes academic articles, lectures, seminars, and discursive essays. This is still its primary use.

The test is now used by some professional bodies, such as the GMC and NMC, to assess the English language skills of overseas professionals. However, it does not test clinical language skills, such as describing medical conditions or treatments, or functional skills, such as dealing with upset or anxiety.

There are two versions of the IELTS test, Academic and General Training. Each version consists of four sub-tests – Listening (40 minutes), Reading (60 minutes), Writing (60 minutes) and Speaking (11-14 minutes) – all taken on the same day.

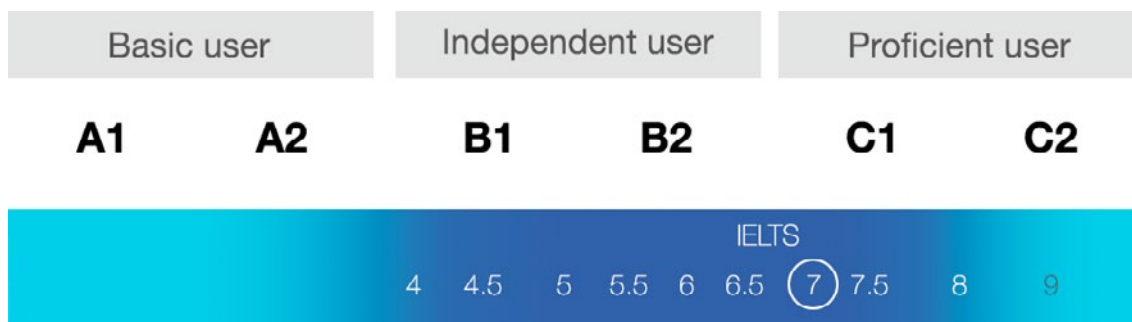
The GMC and NMC both require candidates to have a specific score in the Academic version. Doctors must achieve an overall score of 7.5 (out of 9), with a minimum 7.0 in the four papers. Nurses must achieve an overall score of 7.0 with a minimum 7.0 in the four papers. There is no room for error on the test day.



How difficult is 7.0?

A score of 7.0 is high. It is rated as a C1 level on the European Framework of Language, which is an advanced level, equivalent to that expected of a second year Modern Languages undergraduate in the UK. It is also the level of English required by overseas students who wish to study at Oxford or Harvard Universities.

It should also be stressed that the language tested in the Academic IELTS is exactly that, i.e. academic. This means that candidates need to learn a range of language common to formal written English and more formal academic settings. This includes structures using connectors, multi-clause sentences and complex grammar, as well as the vocabulary required to both understand academic articles and lectures on a wide range of topics, and present and discuss the candidate's own ideas in the Speaking test.



How long does it take to improve an IELTS score?

To go up 1 band in IELTS takes most students approximately 200 to 300 hours of study, consisting of face-to-face tuition and guided self-study, and the higher the level, the more is required. The CEO of International House London, the UK's largest IELTS test centre suggests the following:

"Assuming candidates have experience of test format, progress up the bands is much quicker from a low base from e.g. 4.0 to 5.0 around 150 -200 hours; 5.0 to 6.0 needs 200 hours +; 6.0 to 7.0 needs 300 hours +"

When tested, most EU nurses that we work with benchmark at around 5.0 or 5.5 in IELTS. This means they really need 500 hours or more of study in order to achieve the level set by the NMC. The IELTS Test is certainly 'teachable', but it is necessary to be realistic on the timelines concerned.

Taking the IELTS test on the day

The day of the test is challenging.

Candidates sit the Listening, Reading and Writing papers in one morning. This can be tiring and stressful for some. The Writing paper is the most difficult for the majority of candidates, so performing at one's best having already taken 2 papers is tough, especially if a candidate feels they have not done well in one of those papers. There is then a gap between these 3 papers and the Speaking test, which may be anything from 20 minutes to a few hours. Again, this can be unsettling for some and have a negative effect on their result.

Those candidates who score 7.0 or more in practice tests may therefore underperform on the day. For example, they may fall back on using simpler structures they feel comfortable with rather than use the complex grammar required at this level. If this is the case, please bear in mind that the second test will be easier as candidates know what to expect on the day and how to prepare themselves better for the experience.

Section 2: IELTS preparation and assessment

This section describes how SLC works with clients to prepare candidates to achieve 7.0 in the four papers. It looks at the full training cycle, from initial assessment to training to post-test options for those who don't succeed.

How the different options set out are combined is the result of thorough needs analysis with an individual organisation looking to prepare their candidates for the test, and will vary according to factors such as number of candidates, starting level, and training location.

IELTS assessment

Assessing how candidates benchmark against the IELTS test is crucial to the planning and success of any training programme.

1. Assessments can be conducted at any time during the training process:

- a. Initial interview
- b. Pre-departure
- c. On-arrival
- d. Progress assessment during course delivery
- e. End-of-course

2. Assessment modules can consist of either:

- a. Listening, Reading, Writing
- b. Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking

3. Assessment process is typically as follows:

- a. Client gives candidate names to SLC
- b. SLC contacts candidates with instructions
- c. SLC marks papers and collates results
- d. SLC sends to client for review and discussion



Training options – in-country and in-UK

In practice, training will consist of a combination of tuition and self-study. At SLC, we use digital self-study and virtual classroom tuition tools to create powerful, flexible programmes.

1. Guided self-study

Self-study should in most cases be taken before tutored sessions in order to ensure candidates are fully prepared for a tutored course. These off-the-shelf options are selected according to level of candidates and to integrate with the tuition to come, and form part of a wide programme of study.

- a. IELTS familiarisation (40 hours)
- b. General and Academic English (different levels, 60 hours per level)
- c. Clinical English (100 hours, English for Nurses)

Additional targeted self-study is also taken alongside tutoring, as directed by the trainer and SLC:

- a. Online IELTS resource and library: practice tests, practice materials, model writing answers, videos of speaking tests, videos of test techniques and strategies
- b. Online resources selected by the trainer to support specific learning points

2. Online tuition (virtual classroom)

Candidates can be taught as follows:

- a. Group tutoring (5-10 candidates)
- b. Micro-group tutoring (2-4 candidates)
- c. 1:1 coaching

Course hours and duration are tailored to candidate availability. SLC will assign trainer, arrange lessons, report on attendance, measure progress, take feedback from participants, arrange technical testing, and troubleshoot any course related issues, e.g. provide cover for a sick teacher.

Candidates and clients are responsible for attendance and for completing the extra-curricular work set by the trainer. All classes take place on Zoom, an award-winning platform used by universities, schools and companies around the world. All trainers are qualified English language teachers. They are all IELTS experts, some are IELTS examiners. They are all accomplished online teachers.

Note: face-to-face tuition is available in a small number of locations, e.g. London and Brighton.

Tutored course duration

The success of the course depends on getting the starting level right. We recommend a maximum course length of 200 hours' tuition plus 200-300 hours' self-study in order to keep training within realistic budgets and timeframes. 200 hours can be delivered at 10 hours a week over a 20-week period, for example.

The maximum course length applies when candidates have a starting level of a minimum of 5.5 in the 4 IELTS papers in the Academic version of the test. If candidates score higher, then we would recommend a shorter course as follows:

Minimum starting score	Hours of group tuition	Hours of self-study
6.5 in the 4 papers	100	100-150
6.0 in the 4 papers	150	150-225
5.5 in the 4 papers	200	200-300

Notes

- Training schedules to be pre-agreed with client
- Candidates should study in a group of maximum 10 participants
- There should be a maximum of 0.5 difference in IELTS assessment results between the participants to reduce the negative impact of mixed level groups
- One-to-one sessions can be blended into group tuition
- Candidates who score less than 5.5 in any paper can take self-study courses or individual tutoring before being re-assessed

Accelerated courses for advanced level micro-groups

The following have been developed for candidates who are close to achieving 7.0 in the 4 papers, but need targeted coaching to propel them over the line. The entry requirement is an overall score of 6.5 with a minimum 6.5 in Writing and Speaking.

1. Pre-tuition self-study – general and academic English

- 60 hours C1 General English – 45 hours Language Awareness & Skills, 15 hours Grammar
- Duration: 4 weeks, prior to tutoring

2. Online tutoring, delivered over 8-12 weeks

Number of candidates	Hours' tuition	Hours' self-study
1	12	100
2	18	100
3	24	100
4	30	100

Course reporting and tracking

Reporting is based around client requirements. Progress testing is done regularly, and all results are shared with clients.

- Pre-agreed reporting data: attendance, assessment results, trainer comments, feedback from candidates
- IELTS tests every 50 hours to measure progress against the exam, marks to be shared with candidates and clients. 50 hours is a recommended 'term' of study.
- Candidates receive 1:1 tutorials following IELTS tests
- Pre-agreed client reviews to assess course progress

Booking official IELTS tests

Booking IELTS tests is the responsibility of the client.

There are IELTS test centres around the UK offering multiple dates. See <https://www.ielts.org/book-a-test/find-a-test-location/location-list/united-kingdom/tv>. Make sure you book the Academic IELTS Test, not the General Training version. SLC is of course happy to advise here.

Before you book the test, please

- Wait for final assessment and trainer reports before booking tests
- Wait for SLC and the trainer to give the green light before booking tests
- Initiate post-course revision programmes for candidates where they are not ready

Give nurses at least 2 weeks between finishing their course and taking the test. This time is vital for nurses to

- a. Review and revise the work they have done
- b. Take the practice tests in the online library
- c. Do any additional work recommended by the teacher

Scoring 7.0 at IELTS is no different to achieving an A at A Level or scoring highly in an undergraduate exam. And it has the added pressure of determining whether a nurse can work in the UK, so the pressure really is on. Please give nurses the time and space to do the necessary work where ever possible.

Getting test results

Scores must be shared with SLC as soon as received. Candidates must be made aware that this is of great importance.

Where a candidate fails to score the requirements, a review programme is recommended, tailored to the individual, and shared with clients.

Post-course support

Where candidates do not achieve 7.0 in the four papers, we offer a range of options to support them towards success in their next test.

- Tailored revision programme from the trainer
- Extra revision materials
- Extra practice tests
- Email mentoring from an assigned tutor
- Extra tuition and personal coaching where budget allows
- Drop-in workshops focusing on specific parts of the IELTS test with SLC tutors and examiners
- Pass IELTS 7.0 webinars



Section 3: What challenges will you need to address?

This section looks at the challenges you may expect to encounter when arranging IELTS courses for your candidates and what you can do to support your candidates.

Relocation

Arriving in a new country with a new job in an unfamiliar healthcare system, with a language you are not confident using yet is naturally very challenging.

So, having to study 20 hours a week on a high level Academic English exam alongside inductions, training, settling into new accommodation (sometimes moving accommodation halfway through the course), making friends, and starting shifts on busy wards is undoubtedly tough.

In our experience, the more space and time nurses can be given to study, the greater the difference to their rates of progress and success.

Working and studying

Nurses attending lessons following night shifts are very tired in our experience. IELTS is a high-demand exam that requires concentration and thought. Please try and enable nurses to be fresh before they come to class.

Nurses also need to do a lot of self-study in their free time. Everyone from teachers to management to other staff on the ward need to support them to do as much as possible.

The academic nature of the test

Academic language in a nurse's mother tongue may be challenging, let alone in another language. Academic English is not the language used in everyday conversation, on social media or on the ward. It is vocabulary-rich, follows specific conventions and requires nurses to use language in ways they may not be familiar with, such as listening to a seminar or writing a discursive essay on a topic such as deforestation, shooting stars or sleep patterns.

Some candidates will find this more difficult than others and may make slow progress. They may struggle with the language or lack independent study skills. They will need as much encouragement and support as possible.



Technical and logistical

There are different ways your nurses can study online with SLC tutors.

The most effective way in our experience is to have nurses come into the SLC virtual classroom on different devices in different locations, e.g. their accommodation. They log on to an SLC virtual classroom and meet their tutor. Laptops and PCs offer the best learner experience. Learners should use a headset and a webcam.

It's also possible to organise the following

- As above, with 2 nurses per computer.
- Nurses are in a training room set up for web conferencing – speakers, microphones, camera, screen. The teacher comes in on the screen and works with nurses who are together in the room. This works for small groups, up to a maximum of 6.
- A combination of the above.

So, please make sure that

- Nurses have the right equipment to study
- Training times and rooms are booked in advance
- Shifts are organised to ensure maximum attendance
- Colleagues and managers understand the candidates' need to attend lessons
- Any technical work has been carried out, eg checking the virtual classroom software, internet connection, or available hardware to be used for the lessons.



What else can you do to help?

1. Give feedback to candidates on their language

Listen to what nurses say when they are in conversation with you and help them say it better – correct any grammar, suggest a better word or phrase, and help with pronunciation. When they write something down, correct spelling and punctuation, suggest better ways of expressing a message. This may be awkward at times, but if it becomes habitual, it can really help.

2. Encourage and motivate

Take an interest in the nurses' studies. Encourage them to do additional homework, to read high level articles, and discuss work-related issues and other matters (current affairs, general interest) using high level vocabulary.

3. Be patient

IELTS is a difficult exam for a native speaker, let alone if English is a second or third language, and scoring 7.0 in the 4 papers is very challenging.

Learning the vocabulary, grammar, and academic language skills to do this takes time and for many, hundreds of hours of study. The language candidates need to learn is mostly unrelated to the language they use every day on the ward. All this means that the test cannot be successfully taken with a short crash course. The test day itself can be stressful and some candidates will need to take the test second time.

So even though the pressures to have the candidates working as nurses are considerable, please be patient with candidates. IELTS is a tough exam – but it is certainly doable given expert input, plenty of self-study and sufficient time for candidates to put the hours in. With lots of additional encouragement, they will make the progress they need to score 7.0 and allow them to achieve their goal of working as nurses in the UK.





Specialist Language Courses

About Specialist Language Courses (SLC)

Based at the University of Sussex, SLC is a leading expert in online technical, academic and business language training. SLC works extensively with the medical sector, providing ground-breaking online Clinical English courses for doctors, nurses, healthcare assistants and carers, as well as multiple IELTS Preparation Programmes to international doctors and nurses relocating to English-speaking countries. SLC offers self-study and blended courses, using virtual instructor-led lessons. SLC's healthcare client list includes NHS Trusts, international healthcare recruitment companies, private hospitals and care home groups.



Chris Moore is Managing Director of SLC. Chris graduated from Cambridge University in 1989 and then spent 21 years as English teacher, teacher trainer, school principal, academic director and course designer before founding SLC in 2012.



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