

How Do Asian Candidates Fare in IELTS? A Look at 15 Years of Performance Data

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ABSTRACT

IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and its Asian test-takers have shared a heightening interdependency over the previous two decades. In order to achieve ambitions for an international education at Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, and UK universities, growing numbers of Asian prospective international students, particularly from China and India, find themselves required to undertake IELTS to demonstrate evidence of the sufficiency of their English language proficiency. Such is their importance to the tertiary education sectors of these countries that Asian candidates, who regularly constitute over 25 of the most common 40 cohorts of test-takers by nationality, have been key drivers of the more than ten-fold increase in the global IELTS candidature since 2003. The present study investigates how cohorts from 24 Asian nations fared in the Academic IELTS test from 2003 to 2018, utilising official performance data released by the IELTS partners. The study revealed that; 1) candidates from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines registered the highest overall and section band scores across Asia; 2) the most sizeable overall score gains were made by Bangladeshi, Indonesian, and Jordanian candidates; and 3) worrying deteriorations in outcomes were exhibited by Emirati, Indian, and Iraqi test-takers. Implications of the findings are discussed in terms of Anglophone universities' academic admission practices and the need for further research.

Keywords: IELTS; English language proficiency; language testing; test-taker performance; international students

INTRODUCTION

Demand for an English-medium international education at an Anglophone university has burgeoned across Asia in recent years, fuelled by the pull factors of institution prestige (Hemsley-Brown, 2012), the need for individuals (often the wealthy urban elite) to obtain an advantage in the domestic competition for jobs (Li & Bray, 2007; Rahman et al., 2019), the powerful personal validation of English-medium tertiary qualifications (Pearson, 2020), and the push factors of unfavourable perceptions towards local institutions and economic conditions (Altbach, 1998). Asian nationals feature prominently in the international student populations of tertiary institutions in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK (Education Counts, 2018; HESA, 2020; Parliament of Australia, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2018), with China and India constituting the two largest cohorts in all four Anglophone countries. A significant hurdle in the application process many prospective Asian international students face is a high-stakes English language proficiency (ELP) test to provide evidence of the sufficiency of their language skills. One particular on-demand test, IELTS, is notable as it receives special status in Australia and the UK for its role in facilitating linguistic standard setting and candidate screening for English-medium degree programmes (Merrifield & GBM & Associates, 2012).

IELTS measures a candidate's general proficiency in listening, reading, writing, and speaking (officially, the four *sections*). Performance is reduced to a single score across a nine-band scale in each section, with half bands possible (see IELTS, 2019a). An overall score is also awarded, equating to an average of the four sections, rounded to the nearest half or whole band. A candidate's overall IELTS score is generally considered the most important indicator of their ELP, reflected in its use as the primary measure of linguistic readiness for university

admission (Pearson, 2020), the focus of score-setting research (Hyatt & Brooks, 2009; MacDonald, 2019; Thorpe et al., 2017), and in marketing information by the test's co-owners (IELTS, 2019a). Nevertheless, it is important that section scores are not neglected by institutions since they serve to ensure minimum linguistic standards (O'Loughlin, 2011), although may pose challenges for candidates who exhibit jagged score profiles (Pearson, 2019).

Research in contexts where IELTS is the prescient form of evidence of linguistic readiness (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK) has revealed that an overall score of band 6.0 is an important minimum standard frequently used for the purposes of tertiary admission screening (Ferguson & White, 1998; Hyatt & Brooks, 2009; Lloyd-Jones & Binch, 2012; Oliver et al., 2012; Thorpe et al., 2017). Band 6.0 denotes a *competent user* who “has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in own field” (IELTS, 2019a, p. 14). For candidates who need but fail to achieve this, additional ELP development may be required or enrolment via the successful completion of a pre-sessional English for academic purposes programme (Pearson, 2020), known as ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) in Australia. Nevertheless, even if a test-taker meets the minimum cut-off of band 6.0, their ELP could still be borderline acceptable (Pearson, 2020), with additional efforts at English language development required to ensure successful degree outcomes.

Some institutions establish a more demanding overall minimum entrance standard of 6.5 (Lloyd-Jones & Binch, 2012; MacDonald, 2019; O'Loughlin, 2011), perhaps in light of promulgations by the IELTS partners that further English study is needed for both *linguistically demanding* and *less demanding* tertiary programmes at this band score (IELTS, 2019a). Band 7.0 denotes *probable acceptability* for linguistically demanding academic study and has been associated with “no risk” of academic failure (Allwright & Banerjee, 1997, p. 2), a proposition that requires further investigation. Yet it is fairly uncommon as a minimum standard. This is because only 16% of the global candidature seeking tertiary admission achieve band 7.0 or above (in 2018) (IELTS, 2019c). Institutions would dramatically reduce their pool of eligible prospective overseas students should they raise cut-off scores above 6.5, affecting their international competitiveness (Murray, 2015).

ASIA: THE KEY MARKET FOR IELTS

IELTS has experienced steady growths in candidature since its 1989 inception. In 2018, there were 3.5 million tests undertaken globally (IELTS, 2019b), a healthy rise on the 500,000 in 2003 (Davies, 2008). While the co-owners do not release figures detailing the quantities of test-takers by nationality, evidence from a range of sources suggests Asian candidates are key drivers of these growths. 26 Asian nations and 27 Asian first languages were represented among the 40 most prevalent undertaking Academic IELTS in 2018 (IELTS, 2019c). 16 Asian nationalities have featured in published performance data going back to 2003, which is impressive since up until 2008 only the 20 most frequent countries of origin were reported. As shown in TABLE 1, the importance of Asian candidates to IELTS is further reflected in the large numbers of test centres across the region (notably in the United Arab Emirates, India, and China), while test fees in some Asian countries are among the highest in the world (TakeIELTS.net, 2019).

TABLE 1. Quantities of IELTS test centres and test fees in selected Asian countries, 2019

Region	Country	No. of test centres	Test fees in 2019* (USD)
East Asia	China (PR)	72	279
	Hong Kong	21	267
	Japan	29	234
	Korea (Rep.)	25	224
	Taiwan	40	229
Southeast Asia	Indonesia	58	203
	Malaysia	29	191
	Philippines	49	210
	Thailand	11	228
	Vietnam	27	190
Middle East	Iran (Islamic Rep.)	26	512
	Iraq	2	265
	Jordan	3	205
	Turkey	17	192
Southern Asia	Bangladesh	10	197
	India	92	185
	Nepal	18	168
	Pakistan	24	222
	Sri Lanka	9	139
Arabian Peninsula	Kuwait	3	263
	Oman	10	220
	Qatar	5	272
	Saudi Arabia	26	308
	UAE	103	297

*Test fees for the paper-based Academic IELTS test

English-medium tertiary education is the primary motivation for Asian candidates to undertake IELTS. In 2018-19, seven of the ten most common non-EU international student nationalities at UK higher education institutions (HEIs) were from Asia; China dominated with 121,080 students (24.3% of the total) followed by India, which contributed 27,505 (5.5%) (HESA, 2020). Owing to geographical proximity to Australia, it is perhaps not surprising that Asian countries provided all ten of the largest international student nationalities there (Parliament of Australia, 2019). Again, China prevailed, contributing 152,591 international students (38.3%) in 2018, followed by 71,857 from India (18.0%). Although with notably smaller totals in Canada and New Zealand, Chinese and Indian nationals constituted the two largest international student cohorts in 2016-17 (Education Counts, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2018).

The need for Asian prospective international students to engage with IELTS vis-à-vis other high-stakes ELP tests is a key driving force behind the test's growth globally. Since 2010 in the UK, IELTS has been awarded the status of SELT (Secure English Language Test) (Lomer, 2017), designating a language test condoned by the UK Home Office for immigration and visa purposes (Harding et al., 2020). Only candidates who are able to provide evidence of ELP at Common European Framework of References for Languages B2 level or above may be enrolled directly via an alternative test selected at the discretion of a HEI. In practice, this means entry onto a degree programme via a pre-sessional (a popular admission pathway for students from China) or sub-degree level course requires engagement with IELTS (or a handful of lesser known SELTs). No SELT exemptions are made for nationals from any Asian country, even if they have already completed a qualification equivalent to a UK degree (Home Office, 2021).

There are also factors specific to Asia driving the expansion in IELTS test taking. Research has shown candidates from a range of Asian countries are not always linguistically ready to achieve the scores required by their institution (Pearson, 2019; Shahrzad et al., 2019), necessitating test resits (Alsagoafi, 2018; Barkaoui, 2017; Hamid, 2016; Hu & Trenkic, 2019). Test repetition is particularly notable where high levels of wealth co-occur with low outcomes,

e.g., among the nationals of Gulf states (Alsagoafi, 2018; Gobert, 2019). Additionally, IELTS has gained a strong foothold in Asian contexts where there is a need to screen applicants for admission to domestic institutions. This may be due to the presence of transnational education partnerships between Anglophone and local institutions (e.g. China), the importance of English as a second language in a multilingual polity (Malaysia), or the existence of government-run foundation programmes that assist nationals in the transition from secondary to tertiary level (the UAE) (Schoepp, 2018). IELTS has also enjoyed increasing popularity in Iran (Rasti, 2009), although this is due in part to ongoing Iranian-US tensions that have marginalised TOEFL (Shahzad et al., 2019). As a consequence of these factors and others, the contemporary and historical IELTS test outcomes of Asian candidates are a notable concern, particularly to scholars of the social consequences of language testing (McNamara & Roever, 2006), practitioners preparing students for IELTS in classrooms across Asia, and to test-takers themselves.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The present study constitutes a description of the Academic IELTS test outcomes of candidates from 24 Asian countries from 2003 to 2018, utilising overall and section band score information purveyed through present and historical iterations of the official IELTS website. The study is undertaken to address a notable gap in current research into how candidates, grouped according to nationality, perform in standardised international tests of English. There currently exist few cross-national comparative studies of individuals' assessed ELP, except for Education First's yearly English Proficiency Index (see Education First, 2019), and none comparing test-taker outcomes in IELTS. The study aims to answer the following two research questions:

- RQ 1. How do Asian candidates perform in Academic IELTS, both overall and in the four sections?
- RQ 2. What trends in test-taker performance are exhibited across the available data range?

It is hoped the study will facilitate future research by highlighting the contemporaneous and historically situated characteristics of candidates' test performance that warrant further explanatory study. By examining longer-term trends in IELTS outcomes across national cohorts, it may be possible to draw conclusions over the outcomes of language education policies, such as Malaysia's decision to start teaching maths and science in English in 2003 (Spolsky, 2004) and the increased use of English as the K-12 medium of instruction in the UAE from 2009-10 (Gobert, 2019). The findings could usefully aid researchers and policy makers in further addressing English standards in state education through the creation of new policies. Furthermore, trends in IELTS outcomes provide insights into the linguistic readiness of Asian test-takers for tertiary education with English as the medium of instruction, notwithstanding variations in institutions' cut-off scores (Ferguson & White, 1998; Hyatt & Brooks, 2009; Lloyd-Jones & Binch, 2012; MacDonald, 2019; Oliver et al., 2012). Poor test outcomes indicate resits may be prevalent among that cohort or nationals from that country might need to enrol onto higher education programmes via a pre-sessional/ELICOS pathway.

METHOD

The data described in this study were extracted from the official IELTS website (see IELTS, 2019b). Through this site, the co-owners make publicly available a range of quantitative test metrics on an annual basis, including *Demographic data* and *Test-taker performance*, to help “researchers and teachers understand the performance of the test and how test takers perform in particular countries or regions” and “as an indication of how an individual test taker has performed relative to other members of a grouping to which he or she belongs” (IELTS, 2019c). To answer the research questions, the study utilises contemporary as well as historical nationality data from both metrics. The Demographic data retrieved and described comprise distributions of IELTS band score outcomes (excluding 9.0 since in none of the countries did 1% or more of test-takers achieve this score) of 24 Asian nationalities. The most recent data at the time of investigation, that of 2018, is compared to the earliest published distributions of band scores, often 2004. This is complemented by evidence of Test-taker performance, constituting average overall and section band scores among the 24 cohorts for the period 2003-2018 (from 2008 for eight nations), presented to two decimal places (although only full and half bands are awarded to candidates). 2018 performance figures in the four sections are provided, along with the changes since 2003 (or the year when reporting for that nation began).

DATA COLLECTION

The co-owners do not maintain a public archive of Demographic data or Test-taker performance, only data for the current or previous year, depending on when the data is uploaded and accessed. In order to retrieve historical performance data, the *Wayback Machine*, a web-based application that allows users to travel back in time to view archived captures of a website, was employed. Demographic data and Test-taker performance stretching back to 2004 and 2003 respectively were available, although gaps in the Wayback Machine’s captures resulted in the 2009 and 2011-14 Demographic data and 2016 Test-taker performance data being irretrievable. Collection involved manually extracting percentage distributions and band score values from the captures into an Excel spreadsheet. All nationalities where information was available over the time period were retrieved, with the exception of when only one- or two-years’ worth of data was presented (e.g. Myanmar). As the aim of the study is to describe Asian candidate performance with respect to academic entry standards, only results achieved in the Academic variant of the IELTS test were retrieved. Once the band scores had been input into the spreadsheet, they were inspected for errors that may have occurred during migration, notably missing and inaccurate values.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyse test-taker performance over time, Excel formulae were created that calculated the raw changes in IELTS band scores between the years and across the whole period. A heat map was applied to these changes for the purposes of detecting notable points of interest (and to identify possible errors). The results of the 24 cohorts are presented in five bespoke regional classifications. For each, noteworthy findings that answer the research questions are outlined, often with reference to score sufficiency in relation to the academic admission cut offs synthesised from the literature. Since the explanations for test outcomes and changes over time are complex and multifaceted, the focus of the report is on identifying cross-sectional and longitudinal insights that may usefully serve as points of departure for future explanatory research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

EAST ASIA

TABLE 2 illustrates the distribution of percentages of the overall IELTS band scores of candidates from East Asia in 2018. One notable finding is that the score distributions of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese test-takers broadly mirror each other. 38-42% of such test-takers achieved largely acceptable outcomes of 6.0 or 6.5, although a parallel 35-41% received the borderline scores of 5.0/5.5, necessitating further English study or a pre-session programme. As can be seen, there has been a notable reduction in Chinese and Korean candidates obtaining bands 4.0-5.0 since 2004, while the distribution of Japanese candidates' scores appears stagnant. Hong Kong test-takers performed well in IELTS in 2018; 59% achieved band 6.5 or above, enabling access to most tertiary courses in Anglophone countries. While Taiwan contributed lower percentages of candidates at the highest bands, only 34% were unable to achieve at least 6.0 overall. Unlike Hong Kong, the distribution of test-takers from Taiwan has increased promisingly at bands 6.5 and 7.0.

TABLE 2. Percentages of overall IELTS band scores achieved by candidates from East Asia in 2018 (change from 2004 indicated in parentheses)

Country	<4.0	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5	8.0	8.5
China (PR)	1 (0)	2 (-2)	6 (-4)	15 (-6)	25 (-1)	24 (2)	16 (5)	8 (4)	3 (2)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Hong Kong	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (-1)	5 (-1)	14 (-1)	19 (-5)	18 (-8)	18 (2)	15 (8)	7 (4)	1 (0)
Japan	0 (-1)	2 (0)	6 (0)	16 (0)	25 (0)	23 (-3)	15 (1)	7 (0)	3 (1)	1 (0)	0 (0)
Korea (Rep.)	0 (-1)	1 (-1)	4 (-2)	12 (-4)	23 (-4)	25 (-1)	17 (3)	10 (5)	5 (3)	2 (1)	0 (0)
Taiwan	0 (-1)	1 (-1)	3 (-5)	9 (-12)	21 (-7)	26 (3)	20 (9)	12 (8)	6 (5)	2 (1)	0 (0)

Trends in average overall test-taker performance in East Asia from 2003 to 2018, displayed in

FIGURE 1, show consistent improvement, although four countries' scores at the start of the period were among the lowest on the continent. Hong Kong stands apart from the other East Asian nations with outcomes consistently well-above the common cut-off score of 6.0. Despite a number of downturns, the average Hong Kongese candidate gained 6.5 in multiple recent years, a feat only managed by individuals in Malaysia and the Philippines. All other countries experienced improvements in mean overall scores, with Taiwan (+0.61) achieving the most impressive gains, followed by China (+0.39) and the Republic of Korea (+0.38). Nevertheless, as of 2018, the average Chinese candidate achieves well below band 6.0, notably lower than Taiwanese candidates who consistently manage above 6.0 after 2013. The stagnant performance of Japanese candidates is a cause for concern. Only a very modest 0.15 rise was exhibited (to 5.79 in 2018), allowing Chinese candidates (5.78) to close the gap over the period.

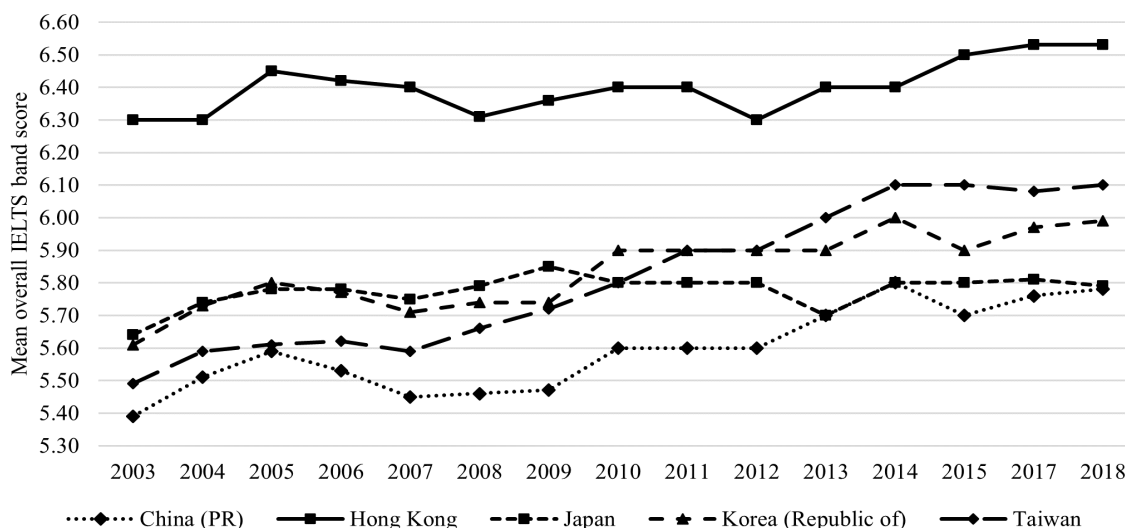


FIGURE 1. Trends in overall IELTS Academic band scores in East Asia, 2003-2018

Looking at the IELTS section scores (TABLE 3), it is evident that the average East Asian candidate has been able to make enhancements in nearly all modules over the time period. In listening and reading, where test-takers registered their best performances in 2018, the changes since 2003 have mostly encompassed over a half-band increase, significant for academic applications. While Hong Kong achieves the highest scores in the four sub-tests, outside of listening the improvements have been relatively minor (with outcomes in writing actually declining by 0.12). Taiwanese candidates exhibited the most impressive gains, a substantial 0.89 and 0.83 in listening and reading respectively. It is clear from the table that the writing and speaking modules are obstacles to many East Asian candidates achieving a band 6.0 overall. Writing in particular appears problematic, with the average Chinese, Japanese, and Korean candidate not able to meet 5.5. Furthermore, enhancements in writing band scores since 2003 appear modest, particularly in Japan where gains were a meagre 0.05, while the speaking scores of Japanese test-takers fell by 0.16 after 2003.

TABLE 3. Mean section Academic IELTS band scores in East Asia in 2018 (and change since 2003)

Country	Listening		Reading		Writing		Speaking	
China (PR)	5.89	(0.56)	6.17	(0.76)	5.39	(0.19)	5.39	(0.03)
Hong Kong	6.98	(0.61)	6.79	(0.29)	5.85	(-0.12)	6.27	(0.16)
Japan	5.88	(0.21)	6.06	(0.51)	5.43	(0.05)	5.56	(-0.16)
Korea (Rep.)	6.23	(0.53)	6.22	(0.62)	5.48	(0.23)	5.79	(0.16)
Taiwan	6.26	(0.89)	6.27	(0.83)	5.55	(0.30)	6.07	(0.44)

SOUTHEAST ASIA

A division among countries with an English-speaking colonial (Malaysia, Philippines) and non-colonial (Thailand, Vietnam) heritage was evident in 2018 IELTS outcomes. As shown in TABLE 4, 79% and 75% of Filipino and Malaysian test-takers respectively were able to achieve band 6.5 or above, facilitating their chances of direct admission to a prestigious Anglophone institution. The distributions of higher band scores among Filipino candidates appears to have risen significantly during the time period. In contrast, Thai and Vietnamese candidates exhibited very similar distributions of test scores, clustered around bands 5.5-6.5.

Score enhancement after 2004 was more promising in Thailand, with a 6-7% reduction in candidates achieving 5.0 and 5.5 being equalled by gains of the same figures at bands 6.5 and 7.0. Indonesia exhibited test scores that fall broadly between these four cohorts. There were noticeably fewer candidates at or below 5.5 compared with Thailand and Vietnam, although the proportion who achieved results that are likely to guarantee direct admission (7.0+) were somewhat lower than Malaysia and the Philippines.

TABLE 4. Percentages of overall IELTS band scores achieved by candidates from Southeast Asia in 2018 (change from 2004 indicated in parentheses)

Country	<4.0	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5	8.0	8.5
Indonesia	0 (0)	0 (-2)	2 (-3)	6 (-7)	14 (-9)	22 (-3)	22 (3)	17 (8)	11 (8)	4 (3)	1 (1)
Malaysia	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (-1)	3 (-3)	8 (-4)	14 (-5)	17 (-4)	19 (2)	21 (9)	15 (7)	3 (0)
Philippines	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (-1)	1 (-1)	5 (-5)	14 (-13)	24 (-9)	28 (9)	19 (13)	7 (5)	1 (1)
Thailand	1 (0)	2 (0)	5 (-3)	13 (-6)	22 (-7)	22 (-1)	17 (6)	11 (7)	6 (4)	2 (1)	0 (0)
Vietnam	1 (0)	2 (0)	5 (-2)	12 (-4)	21 (-3)	21 (-3)	17 (2)	11 (3)	7 (5)	3 (2)	0 (0)

Trends in overall test-taker performance in Southeast Asia (

FIGURE 2) broadly mirror those of East Asia, particularly in terms of the post-colonial nations outperforming their outer-circle counterparts and the general rises over the period. The region posts the highest overall performances across Asia, with the average Malaysian and Filipino candidate comfortably achieving above band 6.0 and consistently above 6.5 since 2005 (although scores have flatlined somewhat since 2012). Indonesian test-takers have also achieved band 6.0 on average since 2008, although seem unable to outrace 6.40. The gains for Indonesian candidates have been solid, rising by 0.53 since 2013 (although levelling off thereafter). Vietnamese and Thai test-takers performed noticeably worse, though from 2013 onwards the average test-taker is close to 6.0 overall. Thai candidates came close to achieving a half-band increase (0.46) between 2003 and 2018, while the Vietnamese posted the smallest improvements in the region, managing a 0.26 increase over the fifteen years.

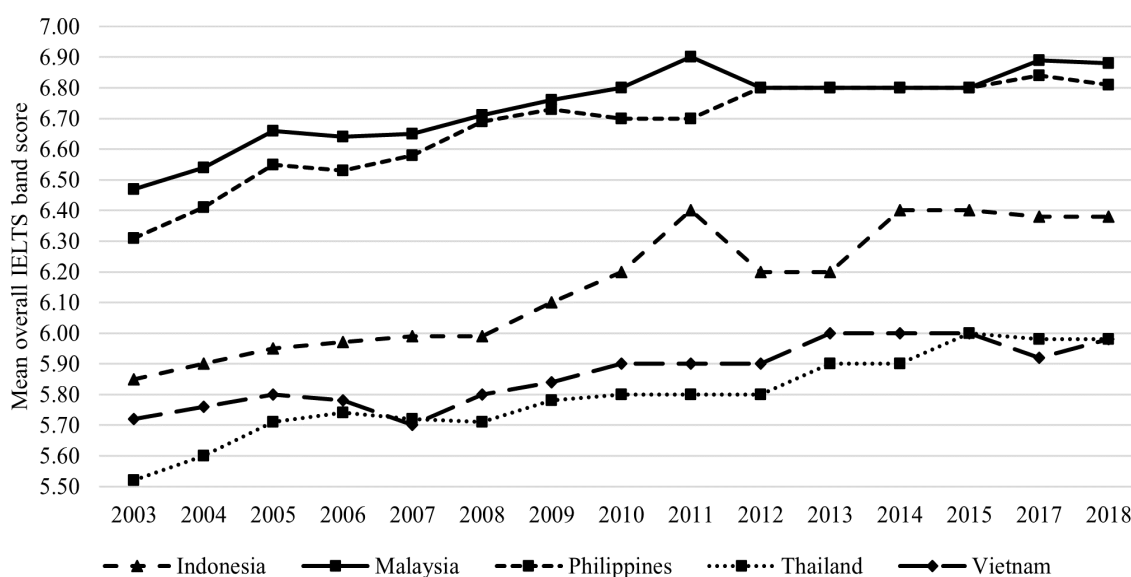


FIGURE 2. Trends in overall IELTS Academic band scores in Southeast Asia, 2003-2018

Candidates from Southeast Asia were the only ones in Asia to achieve band 7.0 or above on average in any of the IELTS sections. Consistent with

FIGURE 2, TABLE 5 indicates that Malay and Filipino test-takers posted impressive mean scores in all modules, notably Malaysians in listening (7.33) and reading (7.11), and Filipinos in speaking (6.84). Malay and Filipino nationals were also the only in Asia to average 6.0 or above in writing, a score likely to enhance tertiary admission prospects at higher-ranked Anglophone universities. It is evident from the table that writing is the module holding back Indonesian and Thai candidates, although robust improvements have been made since 2003 (+0.30 and +0.26 respectively) as well in all other skills. Indeed, in listening and reading, the average candidate in Southeast Asia frequently exhibits score gains of more than half a band, with Filipinos achieving nearly a one band increase in listening. While gains in speaking across the region appear smaller, enhancements of 0.33-0.47 are still promising, particularly since candidates' initial benchmarks were higher than in many other Asian countries.

TABLE 5. Mean section Academic IELTS band scores in Southeast Asia in 2018 (and change since 2003)

Country	Listening		Reading		Writing		Speaking	
Indonesia	6.63	(0.61)	6.67	(0.76)	5.68	(0.30)	6.29	(0.47)
Malaysia	7.33	(0.71)	7.11	(0.63)	6.06	(-0.08)	6.79	(0.42)
Philippines	7.27	(0.98)	6.80	(0.80)	6.07	(-0.15)	6.84	(0.33)
Thailand	6.29	(0.76)	6.06	(0.54)	5.42	(0.26)	5.91	(0.33)
Vietnam	6.09	(0.58)	6.22	(0.43)	5.63	(-0.02)	5.73	(0.06)

SOUTHERN ASIA

TABLE 6 outlines the distribution of overall band scores achieved in 2018 by candidates from Southern Asia. Across the region, there were low proportions of test-takers who achieved scores below band 5.0, whilst Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh produced high percentages of candidates able to achieve band 7.0 or above. Bangladesh appears to be a success story in enhancing test performance over time, with significant reductions in candidates receiving bands 4.0-5.5. Sri Lanka, on the other hand, appears highly stagnant. Indian and Nepali test-takers featured less prominently at higher bands, clustering around 5.5 and 6.0, borderline sufficiency for academic study. The distribution of Indian candidates achieving high or very high scores has dropped precipitously since 2004, a matter necessitating further inquiry. For Nepal, the trends in band score distributions appear mixed; while there were fewer low achieving candidates, there were also slight reductions in those scoring 7.0 and 7.5.

TABLE 6. Percentages of overall IELTS band scores achieved by candidates from Southern Asia in 2018 (change from 2004 indicated in parentheses)

Country	<4.0	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5	8.0	8.5
Bangladesh	1 (0)	1 (-4)	4 (-10)	10 (-15)	19 (-5)	22 (6)	18 (10)	13 (9)	9 (7)	4 (3)	1 (1)
India	1 (1)	1 (1)	3 (1)	10 (4)	24 (9)	25 (3)	17 (-5)	11 (-6)	6 (-4)	3 (-2)	0 (-1)
Nepal	0 (0)	0 (-1)	3 (-3)	13 (-4)	30 (6)	27 (4)	15 (0)	7 (-2)	3 (-1)	1 (0)	0 (0)
Pakistan	0 (-1)	1 (-1)	3 (-3)	8 (-5)	16 (-3)	20 (-1)	18 (0)	16 (4)	12 (7)	6 (4)	1 (0)
Sri Lanka	0 (0)	1 (0)	4 (0)	10 (0)	16 (0)	19 (-1)	17 (-2)	15 (1)	10 (1)	6 (1)	1 (-1)

From 2015-18, candidates from all five Southern Asian countries performed reasonably well overall and within a relatively narrow 5.88 to 6.40 range, with four meeting the 6.0 cut-off often required for direct tertiary admission (

FIGURE 3). Looking further back, sizeable changes were exhibited in the overall scores of all five nationalities, with the exception of the long-time regional leader Sri Lanka, where outcomes fluctuated in a narrow 6.10 to 6.40 corridor. Concerningly for India, there was a fairly dramatic 0.74 fall prior to 2009, after which a short recovery occurred. Similarly, for Pakistani IELTS test-takers, average scores dropped from 6.11 to 5.66 between 2003 and 2008. Unlike India, there was an impressive rebound after 2012, reaching the regional 2018 high of 6.33. More remarkable was the 0.67 improvement in the performance of the average Bangladeshi test-taker across the period. From an initial low of 5.42, Bangladeshi nationals have overtaken those of India, posting average scores above 6.0 since 2015.

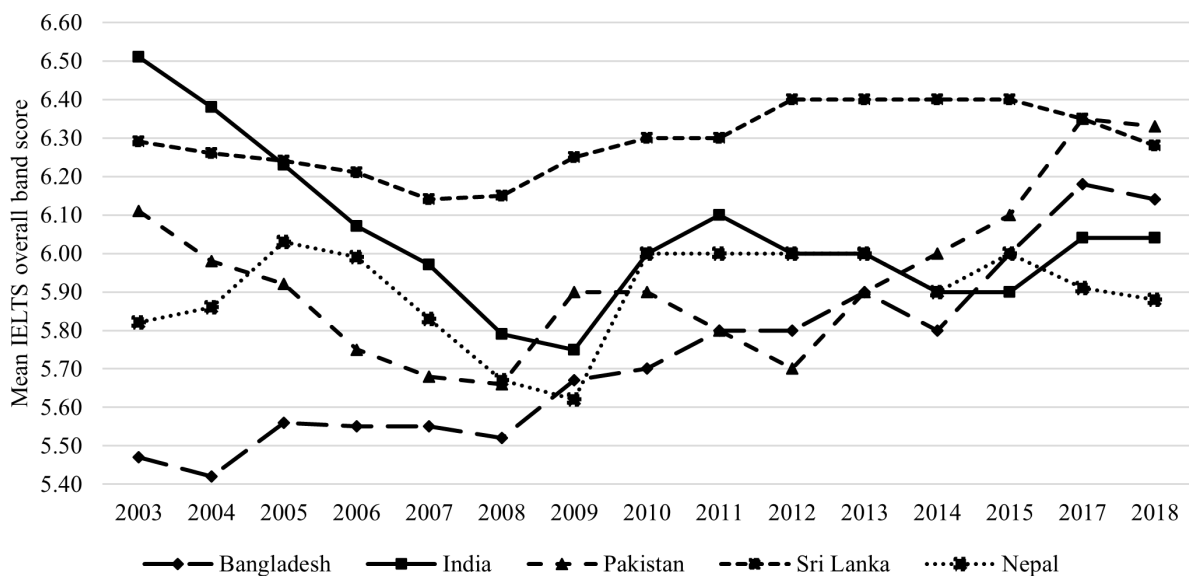


FIGURE 3. Trends in overall IELTS Academic band scores in Southern Asia, 2003-2018

Examination of the section scores in 2018 and the changes since 2003 (

TABLE 7) reveals further insights into how candidates in Southern Asia fared. Listening is comfortably the strongest section in which candidates perform. The average test-taker in Pakistan and Sri Lanka is able to achieve above 6.5, a strong outcome across the wider continent. In speaking, both cohorts fell marginally short of 6.5 in 2018, although 6.46 is still high among Asian candidates. Performance in the writing module by Southern Asian test-takers is, however, concerning. Not only does the average candidate not achieve 6.0, but reductions in performance have been registered in four countries since 2003. In India and Sri Lanka, these are sizeable. The table also illustrates the contrasting fortunes of Indian and Bangladeshi candidates over the years. For the former, a reduction in performance in all four skills is evident (one of only three countries in the dataset where this is so), with the falls in the productive skills being acute. In contrast, gains by Bangladeshi candidates, especially in listening and reading, have been dramatic (1.10 and 0.76 respectively), with the rise in listening being the single largest over the period in Asia.

TABLE 7. Mean section Academic IELTS band scores in Southern Asia in 2018 (and change since 2003)

Country	Listening		Reading		Writing		Speaking	
Bangladesh	6.36	(1.10)	5.98	(0.76)	5.68	(0.29)	6.28	(0.54)
India	6.31	(-0.20)	5.86	(-0.29)	5.74	(-0.74)	5.99	(-0.63)
Nepal	6.23	(0.37)	5.77	(0.19)	5.48	(-0.18)	5.78	(-0.14)
Pakistan	6.64	(0.46)	6.22	(0.49)	5.76	(-0.33)	6.46	(0.28)
Sri Lanka	6.60	(0.25)	6.14	(0.20)	5.68	(-0.44)	6.46	(-0.05)

THE MIDDLE EAST

As shown in TABLE 8, the recent performance of test-takers in the Middle East, with the exception of Iraq, is promising. 45-47% of Iranian, Jordanian, and Turkish test-takers achieved scores above 6.0, likely enabling them direct entry onto English-medium tertiary courses. An additional 37-44% of these candidates exhibited borderline overall scores, while there were generally low proportions of poorly performing test-takers (below 5.5). The most impressive gains were exhibited by Jordanians, who managed to redistribute 21% of their candidates' overall IELTS scores from below band 6.0 to above it. Turkey, too, was successful in displacing weaker performance with outcomes at the 7.0-8.5 levels. In contrast, increases in the proportions of Iranian candidates achieving above band 5.5 did not surpass 3%, indicating improvement has been sluggish. The data for Iraqi test-takers, unsurprisingly given the ongoing conflict over the period in question, portray a completely different picture. The proportions of Iraqi candidates registering bands 5.5 to 6.5 have been replaced by those achieving 4.0 and 4.5, although minor increases at the higher levels are also evident.

TABLE 8. Percentages of overall IELTS band scores achieved by candidates from the Middle East in 2018 (change from 2004 indicated in parentheses)

Country	<4.0	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5	8.0	8.5
Iran (Islamic Rep.)	0	1	3	8	18	26	22	14	7	2	0
	(-1)	(-1)	(-1)	(-3)	(-3)	(2)	(1)	(3)	(3)	(1)	(0)
Iraq ^a	3	6	15	18	18	14	10	8	6	2	0
	(1)	(2)	(6)	(2)	(-2)	(-5)	(-6)	(0)	(2)	(1)	(0)
Jordan ^a	1	2	5	10	17	20	17	14	10	4	1
	(-1)	(-3)	(-7)	(-7)	(-3)	(0)	(5)	(7)	(6)	(2)	(1)
Turkey ^a	0	1	2	8	18	23	19	14	9	4	1
	(-1)	(-1)	(-4)	(-4)	(-3)	(-2)	(1)	(5)	(4)	(2)	(1)

^a Changes from 2010 indicated

With only 2003-08 data available for the Islamic Republic of Iran, it can be concluded that the Middle East occupied a smaller segment of the global candidature for the first five years of the time period. As shown in

FIGURE 4, mean Iranian test-taker performance was the highest in the region, varying between 5.90 and 6.20 over the period, although in the last two years they were surpassed by Turkish candidates (6.24). It can be observed generally that standards have tended to fluctuate over the years, though all countries with the exception of Iraq managed to improve their average overall outcomes in the documented years. Sizeable gains were evident in Jordan, where a 0.57 increase occurred between 2008 and 2018. Candidates from both Turkey and Iraq experienced a notable decrease in test performance immediately prior to 2013, though especially in the case of Turkey, test-takers were able to initiate a dramatic turnaround in outcomes (of +0.74) over the subsequent six years.

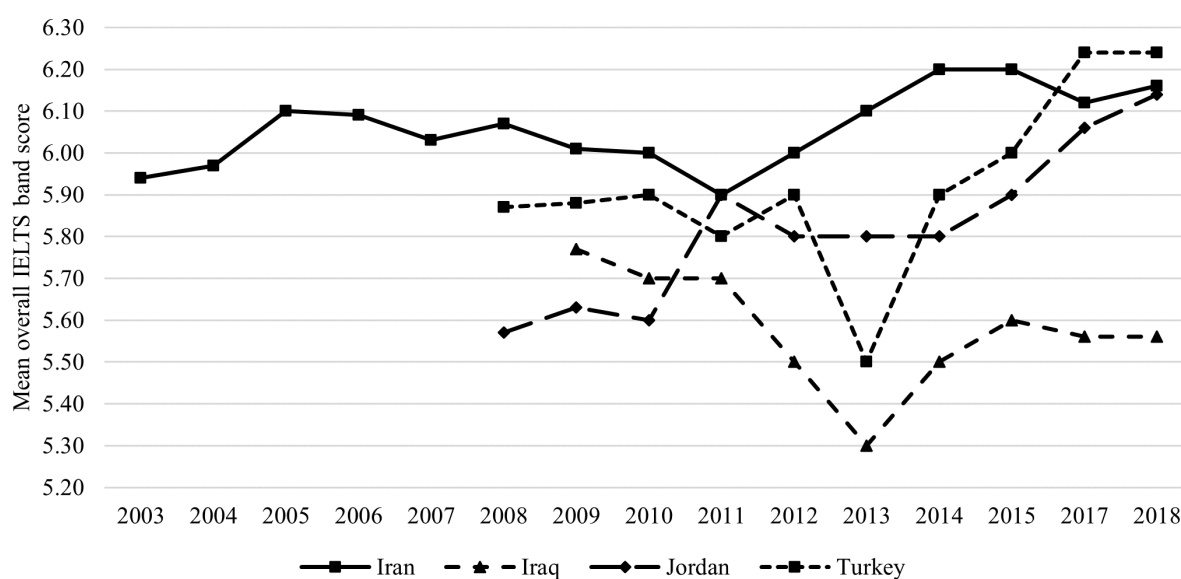


FIGURE 4. Trends in overall IELTS Academic band scores in the Middle East, 2003-2018

TABLE 9 evinces the varying performance of Middle East candidates in the four IELTS sections. Unlike in other regions, no one skill emerges as the most consistently high performing. For Iranian and Turkish test-takers, three of the four modules measured above band 6.0, with writing being the skill holding some individuals back. Concerningly, writing scores for these candidates are well off meeting 6.0 on average, while for Iranians, there has been a moderate reduction of 0.29 since records began in 2003. Jordanian test-takers fared slightly worse since two modules fell below band 6.0, although with an increase of 0.53 to a mean 5.99 in reading, it appears candidates are on a trajectory to break this barrier in future test outcomes. For Iraqis, a troublesome downward trend is apparent in all skills, most acute in the speaking module (-0.34). While the declines are not huge, Iraqi candidates' continued poor performance in the productive skills could be an obstacle for their academic ambitions abroad.

TABLE 9. Mean section Academic IELTS band scores in the Middle East in 2018 (and change since 2003)

Country	Listening		Reading		Writing		Speaking	
Iran (Islamic Rep.)	6.31	(0.63)	6.05	(0.41)	5.63	(-0.29)	6.37	(0.09)
Iraq ^a	5.56	(-0.17)	5.40	(-0.10)	5.14	(-0.25)	5.88	(-0.34)
Jordan ^a	6.37	(0.78)	5.99	(0.53)	5.47	(0.34)	6.47	(0.65)
Turkey ^a	6.43	(0.44)	6.45	(0.62)	5.65	(0.22)	6.17	(0.20)

^a Change since 2010 indicated

THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Nationals from the Arabian Peninsula possess the dubious honour of the lowest IELTS scores in Asia (and incidentally, the world), starkly illustrated in TABLE 10. Results of below 5.0 were achieved by at least 24% of nationals across all countries, with this figure being an alarming 46% in the UAE. Excluding the UAE, the borderline acceptable results of 5.0 and 5.5 were evident among 42-44% of test-takers, although this may be sufficient for admission to a domestic institution. 19-23% were able to achieve cut-off scores acceptable for institutions in the UK and Australia (6.0 or 6.5). Obtaining scores that would all but guarantee admission to an Anglophone institution were managed by less than 10% of test-takers from the five

countries, with those achieving band 7.0 or above constituting just 6% in Oman and the UAE. Concerningly, Emirati candidates registering results of 6.0 or 6.5 were much rarer in 2018 than among all other reported Asian nationalities. Additionally, significant falls in the proportion of those achieving bands 5.5 and 6.0 occurred between 2004 and 2018, requiring further investigation. In contrast, Qatari candidates achieved a 25% reduction in the proliferation of scores below 5.5, although there is still work to be done.

TABLE 10. Percentages of overall IELTS band scores achieved by candidates from the Arabian Peninsula in 2018 (change from 2004 indicated in parentheses)

Country	<4.0	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5	8.0	8.5
Kuwait ^a	3 (0)	7 (1)	16 (1)	23 (-3)	19 (-5)	14 (0)	8 (1)	5 (2)	3 (2)	1 (0)	0 (0)
Oman ^a	3 (-2)	9 (1)	18 (3)	22 (1)	22 (-1)	13 (-2)	6 (-1)	3 (0)	2 (1)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Qatar ^a	3 (-3)	6 (-6)	15 (-10)	23 (-6)	20 (4)	14 (8)	9 (6)	5 (4)	3 (3)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Saudi Arabia ^b	4 (0)	7 (2)	15 (3)	22 (1)	22 (-4)	15 (-4)	8 (0)	4 (1)	2 (1)	1 (0)	0 (0)
United Arab Emirates	7 (7)	14 (12)	25 (16)	20 (1)	14 (-14)	9 (-15)	5 (-6)	3 (-1)	2 (0)	1 (0)	0 (0)

^a Change since 2010 indicated. ^b Change since 2007 indicated

As can be seen in

FIGURE 5, only from 2008 onwards are average national performance figures available for all five Arabian Peninsula countries. With the exception of Emirati test-takers performing reasonably well in 2004, none of the cohorts were able to achieve outcomes of 5.5 on average. One particular trend of note is the alarming drop-off in the mean performance of UAE candidates from 2004-05 and thereafter a steady decline resulting in the unfavourable proposition that the average Emirati registered below 5.0 overall after 2011. Data for Saudi and Omani candidates indicate that, in spite of notable fluctuations in test results (in the case of Saudis, a steady decline from 5.38 to 5.00 between 2007 and 2015, and for Oman, a temporary rise to 5.40 between 2011 and 2013), individuals are slightly worse off in 2018 than when first reported. Similarly, the average Kuwaiti exhibited a fall/rise pattern in performance over the years. From a low of 5.10 in 2014, standards rose so that in 2018 Kuwaiti nationals achieved the highest overall scores (5.38) in the region. Consistent and notable enhancements in the performance of Qatari test-takers were evident from 2009 to 2018. With an average of 5.37 in 2018, Qataris now occupy second place in the region, 0.01 behind Kuwait.

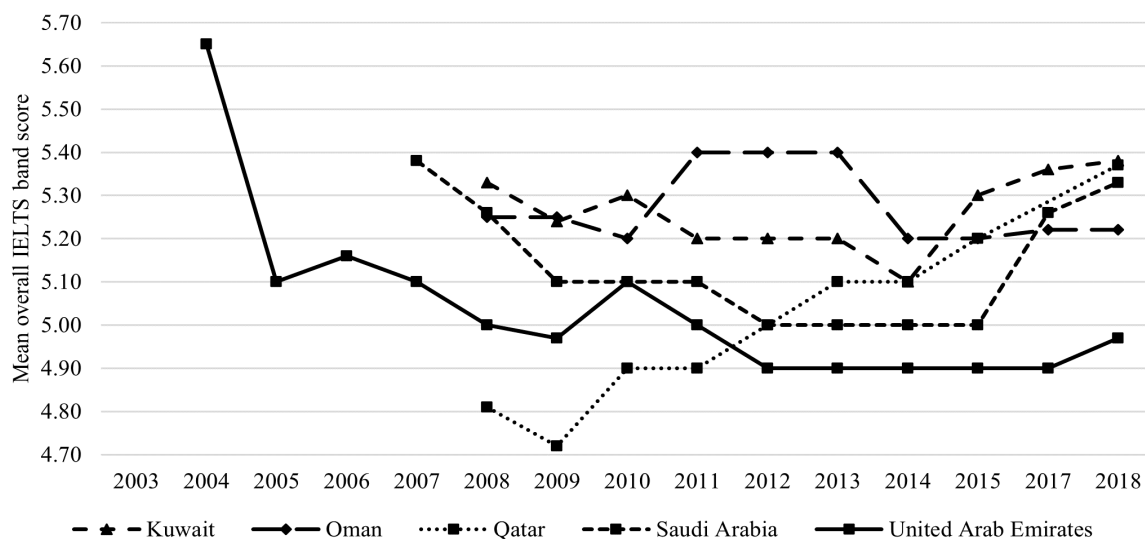


FIGURE 5. Trends in overall IELTS Academic band scores in the Arabian Peninsula, 2003-2018

Figures for test section performance among candidates in the Arabian Peninsula, presented in TABLE 11, exhibit some concerning patterns. Generally, standards across the four skills, particularly in reading and writing, are low when compared to typical university admission criteria. Only Omani candidates on average achieved band 5.0 in writing in 2018, although the gains after 2008 were marginal. For UAE nationals, writing scores have dropped by 0.85 since 2004, while Saudi and Kuwait candidates showed stagnant growth compared with 2007-08. Nationals of all five countries performed most highly in speaking, with Kuwaitis (5.84) and Qataris (5.80) posting scores close to reaching the all-important 6.0 cut-off. Yet for three of the countries, speaking scores have gone down since 2003, for UAE nationals, by an alarming 0.62. Declines in reading outcomes are similarly prevalent, where only Qataris were able to enhance their scores. The performance of the Qatari cohort differs noticeably from the other Arabian countries, with candidates posting reasonable gains in all four skills in the 15-year time period.

TABLE 11. Mean section Academic IELTS band scores in the Arabian Peninsula in 2018 (and raw change since 2004)

Country	Listening		Reading		Writing		Speaking	
Kuwait ^a	5.46	(0.03)	5.06	(-0.05)	4.92	(0.01)	5.84	(0.21)
Oman ^a	5.14	(0.03)	4.93	(-0.10)	5.00	(0.05)	5.55	(-0.10)
Qatar ^a	5.54	(0.84)	4.98	(0.43)	4.90	(0.44)	5.80	(0.54)
Saudi Arabia ^b	5.33	(0.19)	5.08	(-0.06)	4.91	(0.01)	5.76	(-0.13)
United Arab Emirates	4.93	(-0.82)	4.68	(-0.42)	4.64	(-0.85)	5.36	(-0.62)

^a Raw change since 2008 indicated. ^b Raw change since 2007 indicated

CONCLUSION

The present study set out to provide a description of the Academic IELTS scores achieved by Asian test-takers, using current and historical data purveyed by the test's co-owners. As indicated by the fees outlined in TABLE 1, affluent, upwardly mobile individuals are typically overrepresented among IELTS candidates. Thus, the results of this study are not necessarily indicative of language standards in the given countries more generally. The study is also limited by gaps in the data, notably the lack of published average band scores for eight countries

between 2003 and 2008, and the absence of Wayback Machine captures (particularly in Demographic data). A further limitation stems from the simplifications and omissions required in reporting the findings, since it was beyond the scope of the study to document yearly changes in section scores and distributions of candidates achieving particular bands. The first research question asked how candidates perform overall and in listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The key findings indicate:

- Candidates from Anglo post-colonial Asian nations (Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines) achieved the highest band scores overall and componentially. In 2018, 79% and 75% of Filipino and Malaysian candidates respectively obtained overall scores above 6.0, likely guaranteeing admission to an Anglophone HEI. Malaysians were the only cohort to average above band 7.0 in both listening (7.33) and reading (7.11), while they were able to achieve above 6.0 in writing (6.06), along with Filipinos (6.07).
- Although few candidates from China, Iran, Korea, Nepal, Taiwan, and Turkey gained scores deemed probably acceptable for linguistically demanding degrees (7.0+), the countries all registered above 40% among those who achieved band 6.0 or 6.5, acceptable by a large number of Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, and UK universities.
- Test-takers from Arabian Peninsula posted the worst results among Asian candidates. At least 24% of nationals achieved below 5.0 overall. In the UAE, this figure was as high as 46%. For all nations, fewer than 10% of candidates managed scores of band 7.0 or above.
- In the writing section, the average candidate outside of the three highest performing cohorts and the Arabian Peninsula achieved scores that equate to band 5.0 or 5.5, which was the lowest rated skill for all cohorts, with the exception of Omanis.

The second research question was answered by examining trends in performance data, going back to 2003 for 16 of the 24 national cohorts. The main findings were:

- 11 nationalities managed to improve outcomes in all four test sections over the 15 years. The most sizeable overall score gains were exhibited by nationals of Bangladesh (+0.67), Taiwan (+0.61), Jordan (+0.57), Qatar (+0.56), and Indonesia (+0.53).
- There were concerning falls in the overall (-0.47), writing (-0.74) and speaking (-0.63) outcomes of Indian candidates. India was the only country to post reductions in the proportions of test-takers achieving band 6.0 and above, by 18% between 6.5 and 8.5.
- Emirati test-takers exhibited a significant 0.68 mean drop in performance between 2004 and 2018 and reductions in test outcomes in all modules (notably, -0.82 in listening and -0.85 in writing). A 35% increase in the proportion of UAE nationals who obtained below band 5.0 occurred after 2004.
- Overall IELTS scores stagnated over the period for Japan (+0.15), Kuwait (+0.05), Nepal (+0.03), Oman (-0.03), Saudi Arabia (-0.05), and Sri Lanka (-0.01).

The near half-band decline in average overall scores among Indian nationals across the time period is concerning, particularly since English has long been the medium of instruction in schools (Education First, 2019). Notable reductions in candidates achieving band 6.5 and above, while worrying, may ultimately lessen the power of the English-speaking elite, who have traditionally prioritised English over literacy in pupils' native language to the detriment of more equitable outcomes (Education First, 2019). Low IELTS scores among Arabian Peninsula nationals indicate many are linguistically unready to undertake the test (Shahrzad et al., 2019), even if only band 5.0 is required for enrolment at a domestic institution (Gobert, 2019). This likely results in repeat test taking that may not be accompanied by longer-term

investments in ELP (Alsagoafi, 2018; Barkaoui, 2016). The 0.68 reduction in performance among Emiratis after 2004 requires exploration, largely in light of the significant expenditure on Anglicising secondary and tertiary instruction since 2009-10 (Gobert, 2019). Researchers and policymakers would benefit from detailed exploratory investigations into the success stories of the Bangladeshi, Indonesian, and Jordanian candidatures, particularly as these countries' education systems share a number of structural challenges that one might assume would undermine ELP development. These include prolonged under-investment, inequalities in the sufficiency of English language provision, lack of teacher professional development opportunities, and limited local access to proficient English users (Education First, 2019; Rahman et al., 2019).

This study refrains from positing causal interpretations of the presented year-on-year IELTS test outcomes since they are subject to a complex range of independent variables. Allen (2017) identified no fewer than 70 test-taker variables alone. Among these, prior experience of living/studying abroad, motivation to improve, and amount of test practice, as well as the ability and willingness to engage in regular English use with other users (Chappell et al., 2019; Rasti, 2009; Shahrzad et al., 2019) are significant predictors of performance. Impactful non-candidate variables include nations' legacies of colonialism, national language policies (Spolsky, 2004), standards of English provision in the education system, inequalities in English provision (especially between urban and rural areas) (Rahman et al., 2019), the impacts of domestic and international ELP tests (Shahrzad et al., 2019), the extent of IELTS preparation undertaken (Hayes & Read, 2008), and the score-setting practices of HEIs and provision of pre-admission pathways (pre-sessional and ELICOS courses) (Schoepp, 2018). Future research utilising sophisticated regression models that account for the myriad of variables outlined above are central to explaining the outcomes of the national cohorts revealed in this study.

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