

Remote English language testing 'not yet fit for purpose'

Rapid uptake of tests must be accompanied by stronger safeguards given risks of impersonation and unauthorised assistance, says report

Published on May 6, 2026

Last updated May 6, 2026

Patrick Jack (</author/patrick-jack>)

Twitter: [@paddywjack](https://twitter.com/paddywjack) (<https://twitter.com/paddywjack>)

1

Remote English language tests should not be accepted as part of students' visa applications until significant security concerns are addressed, a new report has warned.

The Home Office's new English Language Test (HOELT) is seeking a supplier for its "fully remote" service, which will replace the current system of in-person assessment at controlled test centres.

(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/worrying-number-unverified-english-tests-accepted-uk>)

However, Cambridge English, part of Cambridge University Press and Assessment which runs its own test, called for policymakers to "take stock" of current practices, given the repeated concerns around security.

A report published on 6 May highlights that while remote testing has rapidly evolved from a niche alternative to a mainstream delivery option, stronger safeguards are needed to ensure it is fit for purpose in high-stakes contexts.

It warned of the risks from impersonation, unauthorised assistance, item harvesting and identity spoofing, as well as emerging threats such as deepfake technology and the use of hidden connected



Source: iStock/PeopleImages

Authors cited the importance of maintaining strong cybersecurity standards to combat such risks – such as effective monitoring tools, trained remote proctors, robust ID checks, and a secure lockdown browser.

It also encouraged the adoption of “post-test detection techniques” such as statistical analysis, anomaly detection, and biometric approaches for impostor identification.

Evelina Galaczi, director of research at Cambridge English, said: “Remote testing has an important role to play in improving access and flexibility. However, when test results determine high-stakes decisions, for example, visa outcomes, the bar for security must be exceptionally high.

“Our research shows that while technology can help, it cannot eliminate risk alone. A layered approach, combining technology, human oversight and robust design, is essential to ensure results can be trusted.”

The report also raised concerns with remote testing around bias against some demographic groups, particularly if artificial intelligence is involved.

And it warned that online assessments, which often require a certain level of digital literacy, could make testing more unequal for disadvantaged applicants.

The government is also raising English language requirements for work visas to the equivalent of A-level standard.

But the tender for the UK government’s new online assessment was recently dealt a blow when the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), run by Cambridge, pulled out, citing security concerns. (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ielts-pulls-home-office-bid-over-remote-testing-security-fears>)

The new report warned that some security vulnerabilities are not yet fully understood or observable in real time. It advised caution for now and urged for the maintenance of in-centre testing as the preferred mode of delivery for now.

“Remote delivery should only be adopted once its security and operational challenges can be addressed to a level that ensures it is fit for the intended purpose.”

Previous research has also shown (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/students-who-take-online-english-tests-struggle-courses>) that students who take “less traditional” English language tests to gain entry to UK universities may struggle more to adjust to the classroom.

patrick.jack@timeshighereducation.com (mailto:patrick.jack@timeshighereducation.com)