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# 'Academic misconduct' and poor student performance in UK universities linked to Duolingo entry tests

EXCLUSIVE

i has been told that academics had noticed some foreign students were performing worse than their peers after being admitted to universities using Duolingo tests



An educational expert told i that a 'proper study' was needed to find out how extensive the problems that Duolingo and similar tests had caused for UK universities were (Photo: Ina Fassbender/AFP via Getty)



**By Poppy Wood**  
Politics and Education Reporter

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their use of online Duolingo tests

A one-hour online English language test, which the language learning app markets as a cheap and convenient alternative to traditional proficiency tests, was widely adopted by universities during the pandemic when in-person test centres were forced to close.

In the UK, 62 universities and higher education institutions started allowing potential international students to use Duolingo tests as proof they had the necessary English language skills.

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The majority have since dropped it. But **i** has established that at least 23 UK universities are still using Duolingo for admissions – including three from the elite Russell Group.

MPs were warned last week that the test, and other online assessments that were adopted by universities during the pandemic, have presented higher education with a “particular problem”.

Professor John Heathershaw from the University of Exeter linked the acceptance of “things like Duolingo tests” to lower English language standards and described it as a “major issue” when he appeared before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee last week.

“I am an academic conduct officer at my institution and one of the types of students who tend to plagiarise are those with weaker English language skills,” he said. “There is definitely a correlation there.”

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A lecturer at a Russell Group university who asked to remain anonymous told **i**: “We’ve seen several students who entered the university via the Duolingo tests be found guilty of plagiarism in recent months.

“They are more likely to commit plagiarism because they are less able to understand and apply academic conventions – such as how to paraphrase – correctly.

“In the classroom, I have seen a student whose English was far below the necessary standard and unable to contribute in class or pass the oral presentation component of the course. When I checked her record, I found she had entered on Duolingo scores. It is hard to believe that this person could have achieved a valid pass mark themselves without assistance in the test.”

Aston University in Birmingham is one of the many UK institutions that adopted Duolingo at the height of the pandemic but has now dropped it. A spokesperson told **i** that the decision was taken because of concerns about student performance.

“We have since removed the approval for the Duolingo test, following our January 2023 student intake in response to anecdotal feedback that the students who had taken the Duolingo test were not doing as well as peers on their programmes,” they said.

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not performing at the same level

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problems that Duolingo and

similar tests had caused for UK universities were.

“Many do accept Duolingo and that weaker English appears to correlate with higher rates of academic misconduct,” he said.

## How does the Duolingo English Test work?

Duolingo, a popular language-learning app, launched its online Duolingo English Test in 2016, which it claimed marked was the “first high-stakes, digital-first English proficiency test that could be taken anytime and anywhere”.

It has been hailed as a cheap and speedy alternative to traditional language tests, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which is globally recognised as the most popular English proficiency test for non-native speakers.

The IELTS exam, which takes 2 hours and 45 minute and can cost up to €265 in some countries, often requires prospective students to travel internationally to attend a test centre, where they are checked in-person against official ID.

The \$50 Duolingo English Test comes at a fraction of the price, and asks individuals to complete a series of comprehension, writing and oral activities over the course of just one hour.

Duolingo says it uses a rigorous ID-checking system to ensure the authenticity of those taking its English Language Test. Students are required to submit a digital copy of official identification before taking the test, such as their passport, driver’s licences, or national ID.

Duolingo then asks them to activate their camera and microphone to complete the test, and subsequently checks for inconsistencies with ID and tell-tale signs of cheating, such as a student’s eyes averting from their screen too frequently.

The company’s security policy states that the bulk of these checks are complete using artificial intelligence “since proctor time and attention is a finite resource”. Human proctors then consider the results of the AI checks to determine whether rules have been broken.

Duolingo’s website states that its English test is still used by more than 4,000 institutions worldwide, including dozens of UK universities, with seven elite [Russell Group](#) institutions among them.

But [i](#) has found that 38 of the UK universities, in addition to Aston, have now removed the Duolingo English Test from their lists of approved English language test on their websites.

Several universities that were still incorrectly listed by Duolingo have told [i](#) that they have since been in contact with the US-based company to request they be removed from the app’s website.

A Duolingo spokesperson said: “We created the Duolingo English Test (DET) to remove barriers that traditional tests put in front of international students, and we’re proud to be accepted by over 4,000 schools around the world, including Imperial, McGill, MIT, Trinity College Dublin, and Yale.

“Each of these institutions takes into account the performance of students admitted with DET test scores, and overwhelmingly continue to accept us, having found that DET-admitted students perform just as well as their peers, and that choosing to accept the DET has made their applicant pool more diverse.” [i](#)

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