

UK universities withdraw offers after Pearson cheating concerns

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Hundreds of international students' plans to start UK university courses this autumn have been derailed after testing organisation Pearson revoked some of its online English language exam results following cheating suspicions.



Testing company Pearson began withdrawing and cancelling test scores after finding evidence of cheating earlier this year. Photo: Unsplash

Earlier this year, some universities raised concerns about students who had taken the [PTE Academic Online test](#) applying with full or very high marks.

According to [Pearson](#), recent reviews of some assessments showed testing violations. Upon discovering this, the organisation said it immediately began withdrawing or cancelling test scores. The organisation's in-person tests are unaffected.

But students who are not linked to cheating have been caught up as some British universities, including the University of Edinburgh and the University of Sussex, have stopped accepting the online test as proof of English proficiency altogether.

Other universities have withdrawn offers from applicants whose test results have been revoked by Pearson, such as the University of Southampton, which is also no longer accepting the test for applications submitted through clearing.

The situation has left many students scrambling to take another language exam or secure a place at an alternative institution.

Some universities are offering affected students additional interviews or replacement tests, but there are concerns that it may not be possible to complete these before the start of the upcoming academic year.

Two year expiry

IELTS Academic and IELTS Academic Online	International English Language Testing System (internet-based or at any IELTS test centre)
PTE Academic (Please note that we have suspended acceptance of PTE Academic Online with immediate effect)	In person at any Pearson test centre

The University of Edinburgh's website

“Penalising cheating students is of course the right thing to do, but penalising everyone without giving them the chance to appeal or test again is harsh,” said Susan Fang, CEO and co-founder of OxBridge Holdings, an East Asia-based recruitment agency that assists Chinese students coming to the UK to study.

Ula Tang-Plowman, deputy director of international at the University of Nottingham and chair of BUILA's China group, said, “Universities are all taking this seriously with either additional assessment or cancellation and asking for replacement results, as compliance is our top priority. “Agents are also helping to spread the messages and provide guidance to affected students on what they need to do.”

It is unclear how many students are affected in total. Chinese recruitment agency New Oriental Vision Overseas said approximately 200 of its students have been impacted, while university representatives said the issue goes beyond China, with South Asian students also caught up. “Some universities announced alternative [plans] for these students and our company will help them to rearrange their language test accordingly,” a spokesperson from New Oriental Vision Overseas said.

“However there are still some universities [that haven't] provided any corresponding policies and we will continue to pay attention to this matter.”

Pearson has now stopped delivering the online test in China, according to its website.

“It is extremely bad timing because there is little lead time until the start of the new academic year,” said Fang.

“It's not that easy to book a last-minute test,” she added, explaining that IELTS slots in mainland China are mostly booked up for the summer.

“Some of our students have to fly to Hong Kong to sit an IELTS test without much preparation. The ordeals of arrangement and emotion upset are costs which students had not expected.”

Pearson is offering impacted test takers a free voucher to take its in-person test, PTE Academic. Fang said she would also divert some of her students to Australian institutions for the spring intake.

“This way our students have more time to improve their English and still stand a chance to get into a world recognised top university,” she said.

Tang-Plowman said the situation has “created a lot of work for universities at this crucial time for international clearing”.

Pearson said, “The security of our testing is of paramount importance to Pearson to ensure that each English assessment accurately reflects the skills and abilities of the test taker.

“Recent reviews of assessments for some PTE Online test takers showed some testing violations so we have taken immediate action to withhold or cancel those test scores.

“There are no issues with scores for PTE Academic tests taken in one of our test centres.

“We are offering impacted test takers a free voucher that gives them the opportunity to take PTE Academic in person at one of our 446 test centres across 117 countries. Most test takers receive results within 1.5 days.

“We are not sharing volume at this stage, but all impacted test takers have received communications from us.”

A University of Southampton spokesperson said, “In common with a number of other universities, we have been made aware that Pearson has revoked the test results of a significant number of applicants taking its PTE Academic English test, while it investigates various aspects of the test.

“In line with our rigorous admissions policy and to ensure full compliance with the UK’s visa requirements, as well as ensuring a standard of language proficiency to enable our students to flourish, we have as a consequence had to withdraw offers from those applicants whose test results have been revoked by Pearson, as they no longer meet the academic conditions for entry.

“We are liaising with individual applicants to discuss their particular circumstances and options.”

A University of Edinburgh spokesperson said, “We are aware that concerns have been raised by a provider of online English language testing. We have suspended acceptance of this test in our admissions process with immediate effect and are working closely with any affected applicants and students.”

The University of Sussex said, “The University took the decision to remove the PTE Online test from our list of recognised English language tests.

“At Sussex, we accept around seven different proficiency tests for English, both online and in-person and are supporting applicants with their options, and where necessary, in finding alternative tests. We are working closely with applicants and international agents to support and advise on next steps.”