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Ielts opens doors in Iran

Increasing numbers of Iranians are taking Ielts as their passport to a university course abroad – or to a new life in Australia or Canada

EXIT EXAMS Demand for Ielts has increased as the number of people leaving Iran to work or study abroad has grown

While Toefl has never enjoyed much popularity in Iran, Toefl in all its forms has been in demand for a long time, writes our Iran correspondent Ebi Tahasoni. It was available in a number of venues around the country until a couple of weeks ago, when ETS briefly suspended registration until banks could resume processing transfers from Iran.

The computer-based Toefl is not as popular as Ielts because the demanding integrated tasks make it quite hard for tutors to train candidates in the usual six months to a year. Ielts is a more down-to-earth test and the nature of the tasks allows candidates and tutors to focus on a single skill.

Ielts is particularly popular among those emigrating to Australia or Canada, students of English (in preference to the more demanding FCE, CAE and CPE tests), language teachers, professionals and graduates applying for postgraduate courses in universities abroad.

Ielts used to be mainly offered by the British Council, but this operation closed down in February 2009 (see the April 2009 Gazette) and it is now offered in Iran through two centres.

Ielts Tehran, which is well established in the country, works as an agent for Ielts co-owners IBT and has a venue in Tehran, but it never announces in advance when it opens registration, so all places are taken minutes after the links are available.

Iran Ielts was formed after the BC left, as a collaboration between Chabahar International University, an agency called Markaz and the NOET (National Organisation for Educational Testing, a government agency that conducts university entrance exams and online registration for these). A few months

ago Chabahar University was replaced by Imam Reza International University in Mashhad, but the Imam Reza University Ielts testing operation appears to have come to an abrupt end for reasons unknown. Iran Ielts works as a sub-centre with Sussex Downs College and until a few weeks ago had three venues in Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan, but has recently shut down its Mashhad and Isfahan operations without any formal explanation. As a tutor, I personally feel the Sussex Downs College centre's examiners seem very in touch with candidates and tutors, holding workshops and Tesol courses for teachers and comforting candidates by providing warm test environments and small talk before the speaking test to ease their nerves.

In my own city of Mashhad, there used to be around 300 candidates for each test, held every month with the examining team

flown in. Most exam sessions were held in the Hotel Alghadir (many candidates complained about the sound system) while the speaking test was held at an office belonging to Imam Reza International University.

Registration for the test is still possible, with many test dates available, although tests will fill up faster because now there are fewer venues. The last time I saw Iran Ielts' venue in Tehran University in July, there were over 1,000 seats in the hall. Demand clearly remains extremely high.

Payments are made, mostly hassle-free, through internet banking gateways connected to the central bank's 'Shetab' centralised transaction system. Changing a test date costs around \$50 (£31). The process is easy if you have a debit card with an internet banking service from banks such as Saman or Mellat which provide better gateways.

Iranians in a rush take the test in Armenia or the United Arab Emirates, but the costs mean that only a few people do so each month. There are Ielts tours offered by travel agents which send a tutor along with the candidates to support them.

Demand for Ielts has been on the rise since Canada and Australia started asking for it for immigration, and universities in Europe, Malaysia and Canada started accepting it as a language proficiency credential. These are the main destinations for Iranian professionals and graduates, and the number of people leaving the country is at a record high. Teachers have never enjoyed such popularity among candidates. Two years ago I used to charge \$25 (which would now be worth £16) for a ninety-minute session and usually had two or three students at any time, along with two open classes. Fees are now \$45 (£28) an hour, I have five to six private students a month and six open classes.

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