Validating the ISE Digital writing module
EAP teacher and student perceptions

1 Introduction

Universities and English instructors increasingly need assessments that reflect the writing tasks students face in academic and professional settings. Trinity's ISE Digital writing module meets this need by assessing the communicative and analytical skills required for studying and working in English. This summary outlines the key findings from a validation study investigating how well the ISE Digital Writing module mirrors real-world academic writing practices. The study gathered feedback from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors and international students at UK universities. The results highlight how the module promotes writing skills that are relevant, purposeful, and transferable to real academic contexts. Key findings are summarised here; full details are available in the publications.[1]

2 Assessing Writing in the digital age

The ISE Digital exam measures and promotes the real-world writing skills that second language learners need for study and work. As communication increasingly takes place online, the ability to write clearly, appropriately, and purposefully is essential for academic and professional success.

Writing at university and in the workplace typically falls into **two** categories:

◗ **Digital communication:** Writing to communicate with others via emails or chat messages, for both relationship-building and academic or professional purposes.

◗ **Longer, more complex texts:** Composing essays or reports that synthesise multiple sources and demonstrate analysis and interpretation.

The ISE Digital reflects both dimensions through **two** tasks:

◗ **Written online communication:** Candidates respond to an email, forum post, or group chat, mirroring authentic online interactions.

◗ **Writing from sources:** Candidates compose a report or essay by synthesising multiple sources, reflecting academic writing beyond traditional essay tasks.

Trinity's empirical research confirmed that these tasks align closely with the writing students undertake at university.

3 Methodology

The study involved 50 EAP teachers and 90 international students from 20 UK universities, including 10 from the Russell Group. The students represented diverse linguistic, cultural, and subject backgrounds, and had previously taken other recognised English proficiency tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, or Pearson Academic, making the sample representative of ISE Digital's intended test-taker population.

The students completed the full ISE Digital Writing module, while teachers were orientated to it. Opinion data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, focusing on task authenticity, validity and comparability with real university requirements. Teachers also reported the criteria they use to assess EAP writing, which were then compared with the ISE Digital marking criteria. Finally, all participants shared their overall views of the writing module as a whole.

4 Results

Written online communication

Both teachers and students recognised this type of writing as a frequent part of university life, central to wellbeing and academic success. Participants viewed the ISE Digital *Written online communication* task as an authentic reflection of real online interaction, successfully capturing the skills needed for digital communication.

▶ 74% of students reported frequently engaging in written communication via emails, direct messages, or group chats, and 69% of all participants viewed this type of writing as important for academic success.

▶ While 79% of students reported feeling confident in their written communication, only 33% of teachers agreed, noting that many students struggle to adapt tone and content appropriately and often need guidance on how to communicate effectively.

▶ Most participants agreed that the ISE Digital task is similar to real-life written communication (74% agreement) and that it engages the same skills (78%), making it an effective measure of ability to communicate online (74%).

Writing from sources

Both groups identified writing from sources, such as essays and reports, as one of the most frequent and important writing tasks at university. Participants agreed that the ISE Digital *Writing from sources* task authentically represents EAP academic writing and effectively elicits the skills required for critical source-based writing.

▶ 90% of all participants reported that source-based writing of essay and reports is the most common type of academic writing assignment, and 97% described it as important to academic success.

▶ 69% of students expressed confidence in their source-based writing ability, in sharp contrast to only 4% of teachers who agreed students perform this type of writing well.

▶ Teachers reported that most students struggle greatly with academic writing, particularly with critical use of sources, and this was often linked with unfamiliarity with UK academic conventions or previous language training for inauthentic test tasks.

▶ Most participants agreed the ISE Digital task resembles real academic writing (70%), engages the same skills (89%), and effectively measures students' ability to meet academic writing demands (67%).

▶ The assessment criteria teachers reported using on EAP courses matched those of the ISE Digital in almost all cases (99%).

ISE Digital Writing module

Both groups of participants felt positively about the overall writing module, expressing confidence in the tests' authenticity, validity, and impact on learning.

◗ 80% of all participants believe studying for the ISE Digital Writing module will help students prepare for writing at university.

◗ A large majority of students (74%) viewed the ISE Digital Writing module favourably as an alternative to other university entry tests.

5 Implications and discussion

Findings show that the ISE Digital Writing module closely mirrors writing in the university context. Both tasks were seen as authentic, valid measures of ability, with most participants believing the test would help students prepare for writing at university and serve as a strong alternative to existing entry exams.

The study also revealed a gap between students' self-perceived abilities and teacher evaluations, particularly in areas such as tone, clarity and coherence, and source integration. This suggests the need for continued explicit instruction and the use of authentic assessment tasks that better reflect real academic writing demands.

6 Conclusion

The study provides clear evidence that the ISE Digital Writing module reflects the realities of modern-day writing at university. By assessing skills that extend beyond traditional independent essay formats, it supports the development of both pragmatic skills for effective online communication and analytical skills for source-based writing. Together, these tasks help learners prepare for the varied writing demands they will encounter in higher education and beyond, bridging the gap between language testing and real-world academic practice.

Endnotes

1 Carastoian Reid, A. (2025). Validating an integrated reading-into-writing task to assess writing for academic purposes. *International Journal of English for Academic Purposes: Research and Practice, 5(2)*, 147-185.
Carastoian Reid, A. (2024, May). *Too long; didn't read: Assessing written online communication in the 21st century* [Conference presentation]. European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) Annual Conference, Belfast, UK.