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U. Michigan Is Latest TOEFL Challenger

Not that long ago, a single test — known as TOEFL — was the key for foreign students seeking to enroll at colleges and universities in the United States. The Test of English as a Foreign Language, offered by the Educational Testing Service, is administered around one million times a year.

In recent years, however, TOEFL has had competition from IELTS (for International English Language Testing System), a British-based test initially used for admission to universities in the British Commonwealth. IELTS has reached a level of popularity that rivals TOEFL's worldwide, and it has gained considerable ground in the United States. And the publishing giant Pearson, backed by business schools, is preparing an alternative to enter the market. Now comes word of a new entry: a test long offered by the University of Michigan, for which plans have now been adopted for international distribution.

The Michigan test — known as the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery, or MELAB — plans to promote itself as less expensive and more precise than its competitors, and as a paper-and-pencil test at a time that exams are moving online. But whether it will be able to capture market share against well-established players and the Pearson effort remains to be seen.

MELAB has its roots in Michigan's English Language Institute, which was the first language program of its kind in the United States to focus on teaching and research on how non-native speakers of English can learn the language. Over the years, the institute has offered a range of tests, including MELAB, but on a much smaller scale than TOEFL. The MELAB has been available only in North America, where most students do not need to qualify to be admitted to an English-language college program. The institute, however, is now starting the process of setting up testing centers and contracting with various educational agencies to offer the test all over the world — something TOEFL and IELTS already do and that Pearson says it will do.

Jeff S. Johnson, program director for MELAB, said that the test costs \$80, with another \$40 for an optional test of speaking ability. Both TOEFL and IELTS use sliding scales to reflect different standards of living in different parts of the world, but their scales would put the test above the MELAB prices.

Like the other tests, the MELAB features a series of examinations on different language skills. MELAB tests composition, listening, and a combination of grammar, vocabulary and reading. Plus there is the optional speaking test. A "concordance table" is offered to demonstrate comparability with TOEFL scores, Johnson said. Generally, he said that the

colleges that accept MELAB do so after a prospective student requests to have the test counted, and that he anticipates that figure taking off once testing centers are set up worldwide. (IELTS has gained ground in the United States in part out of the view of college officials that, if a test is credible, there is little for an institution to gain in excluding it from consideration just because another test has been more popular until now.) The MELAB test takes three to three and a half hours to take, not counting the 15 minute speaking portion.

A key testing difference is the speaking examination. In MELAB, test takers undergo a “co-constructed dialogue” in which they are asked questions about their proposed field of study. “This is a real discussion, with no set questions, so it can’t be coached,” Johnson said. “It’s not something they can study for, but it’s real.” The examiners are trained on how to ask questions and evaluate answers and they assign scores on a four-point scale. (TOEFL’s speaking test involves responding to a series of prompts on sharing opinions or responding to information that has been read.)

While the trend in testing has been moving online for years now, MELAB is proudly a paper-and-pencil test, which Johnson said he believed many test takers appreciate, especially those without the same computer access as is common in the United States. “We are now ready to expand.”

Michigan has not planned a major campaign to announce the expansion efforts, but officials at the language institute said that they were ready to go public. A spokesman for ETS said that officials there had heard rumors about Michigan’s plans, but didn’t have any details and so could not comment on MELAB. ETS appears sensitive about IELTS. At this month’s meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools, an ETS presentation about TOEFL included a few jabs at IELTS.

Beryl Meiron, executive director of IELTS, said she didn’t know details of Michigan’s plans, but that she looked forward to learning more.

— **Scott Jaschik**