

The ALTE Code of Practice

Introduction

In 1994 the members of ALTE decided that it was essential to adopt a formal Code of Practice which would both define the standards that current and future members would agree to aim to meet in producing their examinations and serve as a statement to consumers of those examinations of what they should expect.

The Code of Practice was devised with the principal objectives as stated in the Introduction to this document very much in mind; in order to establish common levels of proficiency, tests must be comparable in terms of quality as well as level, and common standards need, therefore, to be applied in their production. The Code of Practice sets out these standards and states the responsibilities of both producers and users of language examinations.

The ALTE Code of Practice

As providers of language examinations, the members of ALTE wish to adopt a Code of Practice in order to make explicit the standards they aim to meet, and to acknowledge the obligations under which they operate.

In formulating and adhering to a Code of Practice, it is necessary to distinguish between the various roles of those who have an interest in the issue of setting and maintaining standards in language examinations. These are: examination developers, examination users and examination takers.

Examination developers are people who actually construct and administer examinations as well as those who set policies for particular testing programmes.

Examination users may select examinations, commission examination development services or make decisions which affect the educational possibilities and careers of others on the basis of examination results.

Examination takers, or candidates, are those who, either by choice or because they are required to do so by examination users, take examinations.

The roles of examination developers and users may of course overlap, as when a state education agency commissions examination development services, sets policies that control the development process, and makes decisions on the basis of the results. Members of ALTE are primarily concerned with the development and administration of examinations. As such, they have a duty towards examination users and ultimately to examination takers. The decisions made by examination users have a direct effect on examination takers or candidates; for that reason, the obligations of examination users are also dealt with in this Code of Practice.

Members of ALTE undertake to safeguard the rights of examination takers by striving to meet the standards of a Code of Practice in four areas:

- Developing Examinations;
- Interpreting Examination Results;
- Striving for Fairness;
- Informing Examination Takers.

The Code of Practice is divided into two parts. Part One focuses on the responsibilities of ALTE members and Part Two on the responsibilities of examination users.

Part 1 – Responsibilities of ALTE Members

Developing Examinations

Members of ALTE undertake to provide the information that examination users and takers need in order to select appropriate examinations.

In practice, this means that members of ALTE will guarantee to do the following, for the examinations described in this book:

Define what each examination assesses and what it should be used for. Describe the population(s) for which it is appropriate.
Explain relevant measurement concepts as necessary for clarity at the level of detail that is appropriate for the intended audience(s).
Describe the process of examination development.
Explain how the content and skills to be tested are selected.
Provide either representative samples or complete copies of examination tasks, instructions, answer sheets, manuals and reports of results to users.
Describe the procedures used to ensure the appropriateness of each examination for the groups of different ethnic or linguistic backgrounds who are likely to be tested.
Identify and publish the conditions and skills needed to administer each examination.

Interpreting Examination Results

Members of ALTE undertake to help examination users and takers interpret results correctly.

In practice, this means that members of ALTE will guarantee to do the following:

Provide prompt and easily understood reports of examination results that describe candidate performance clearly and accurately.
Describe the procedures used to establish pass marks and/or grades.
If no pass mark is set, then provide information that will help users follow reasonable procedures for setting pass marks when it is appropriate to do so.
Warn users to avoid specific, reasonably anticipated misuses of examination results.

Striving for Fairness

Members of ALTE undertake to make their examinations as fair as possible for candidates of different backgrounds (e.g. race, gender, ethnic origin, handicapping conditions, etc.).

In practice, this means that members of ALTE will guarantee to do the following:

Review and revise examination tasks and related materials to avoid potentially insensitive content or language.

Enact procedures that help to ensure that differences in performance are related primarily to the skills under assessment rather than to irrelevant factors such as race, gender and ethnic origin.

When feasible, make appropriately modified forms of examinations or administration procedures available for candidates with handicapping conditions.

Informing Examination Takers

Members of ALTE undertake to provide examination users and takers with the information described below.

In practice, this means that members of ALTE will guarantee to do the following:

Provide examination users and takers with information to help them judge whether a particular examination should be taken, or if an available examination at a higher or lower level should be used.

Provide candidates with the information they need in order to be familiar with the coverage of the examination, the types of task formats, the rubrics and other instructions and appropriate examination-taking strategies. Strive to make such information equally available to all candidates.

Provide information about the rights which candidates may or may not have to obtain copies of papers and completed answer sheets, to retake papers, have papers re-marked or results checked.

Provide information about how long results will be kept on file and indicate to whom and under what circumstances examination results will or will not be released.

Part 2 - Responsibilities of Examination Users

Examination users are in a position to get information about examinations from examination developers, and a Code of Practice for them concerns the appropriate use of this information. Like examination developers, they have a duty towards candidates, and are under an obligation to set and maintain high standards of fair behaviour. These responsibilities are described below under the following four headings: Selecting Appropriate Examinations, Interpreting Examination Results, Striving for Fairness, Informing Examination Takers.

Selecting Appropriate Examinations

Examination users should select examinations that meet the purpose for which they are to be used and that are appropriate for the intended candidate populations.

Interpreting Examination Results

Examination users should interpret scores correctly.

Striving for Fairness

Examination users should select examinations that have been developed in ways that attempt to make them as fair as possible for candidates of different backgrounds (e.g. race, gender, ethnic origin, handicapping conditions, etc.).

Informing Examination Takers

In cases where the examination user has direct communication with candidates, they should regard themselves as having many of the obligations set out for members of ALTE under the section in Part One entitled Informing Examination Takers.

Acknowledgement is made to The Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education produced by the Washington D.C. Joint Committee on Testing Practices.