

# **Proposal for an Essay Assessment Component in the Award of Higher Certifications by the International Fitness Association**

## **Executive Summary**

International Fitness Association is currently offering Sports Nutritionist, and Aerobic /Fitness Instructor certification testing via internet. Unsupervised testings had been used by peers in the industry, such as, AMFPT. However, multiple choice questions, as in use now, are only able to assess knowledge but not the width and depth of knowledge and critical thinking skills that should be the characteristics of higher forms of certifications, as they indirectly imply the “license to teach.”

This proposal proposes the use of a essay assessment as a sole tool for assessment or as part of the assessment package, depending on the importance of research-backed knowledge on the specific certification. To illustrate, essay assessment can be used as the only tool as assessment for a higher sports nutritionist certification but only suitable as a partial tool for that of a higher fitness instructor certification. When used as the only tool, a long essay of between 6000 to 6500 words and if used as a partial tool, a shorter essay of between 3000 to 3500 words is deemed appropriate. As the demand on an essay assessment is significant for the candidate, the higher certification awarded should be life-long, subjected to maintenance of the initial certification by routine web-based assessment, currently set at once every 2 years.

To reduce the overheads, self-nominated assessors are encouraged, as practiced by some reputable academic journals. Essay assessors should be academically competent. The Fellow of the International Fitness Association (FIFA) is proposed as a scheme to reward and encourage contributions to the IFA. When implemented, the increase of workload in IFA will be substantial but the FIFAs, being fellows, can help by grading the essays submitted on behalf of the IFA. In return, IFA can consider the routine web-based assessment by FIFAs be complementary.

In summary, although the workload increase will be significant during implementation of the schemes in this proposal, IFA can look forward to many great benefits. These can include IFA's higher certification be seen as a mark of excellence in the industry, which will increase the demand of IFA-certified persons. This will indirectly increase the demand of IFA's certification in the industry, resulting in great improve in IFA's image and the value of its certifications.

Prepared and Signed by

Maurice H.T. Ling, BSc(Hons)(Biochem), Adv Dip Comp, SN

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Maurice H.T. Ling

BSc(Hons)(Biochem), Adv Dip Comp, SN

## **1. Objectives**

The objectives of this proposal is to put forward and argue for the need of an essay component in the testing and certification process of higher certifications in the International Fitness Association.

This proposal will include an overview of the implementation of the essay assessment component, assessors and grading logistics.

## **2. Brief Description of Current Situation**

International Fitness Association (hereafter known as “IFA”) is an online (web-based) health and fitness certification testing body established in 1995, based on Orlando, Florida, USA.

As of writing, IFA offers two online certifications, the Aerobic/Fitness Instructor (upon completion, the certified person will be known in the industry as a “Certified Personal Trainer” or “CPT” for short and entitled to use the title of “CPT”) and Sports Nutritionist (upon completion, the certified person will be known in the industry as a “Sports Nutritionist” or “SN” for short and entitled to use the title of “SN”). Both certifications have a life span of two calendar years, after which, re-certification is necessary. The current certification process for these two certifications involves one hundred true-false or multiple choice questions. Testing is free of charge but upon qualifying, a cost of ninety-nine US dollars is needed in order to obtain the certification card and the two years of certification commence on the day of payment.

IFA do not require or accept continuing education units (CEU) for the purpose of certification or the maintenance of certification. It is the philosophy of IFA that continuing education is both a person endeavour and responsibility and the process of going through the actual test again will serve as a good gauge of up-to-date knowledge.

Due to the fact that in certain countries, it is a routine that the trainer or instructor must be of a higher qualification than the level precipitating from the course he delivers, a “Master Fitness Instructor” certification is in place, which requires the candidate to be a IFA-certified CPT and had conducted a course by which three or more of his trainees eventually achieve CPT certification by IFA.

### 2.1 Comparison with other certification agency

For the purpose of comparison, the American Muscle & Fitness Training Institute's (AMFPT) certification process is illustrated.

Taken directly from AMFPT's website (<http://gregladd.bizland.com/amfpt22/id13.html>), AMFPT's certification procedure is as follows:

1. Enroll online or by mail.

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2. See manual login instructions on your e-mail receipt and on screen when you finish.
3. Access the online manual and exam.
4. Study the manual and submit your exam whenever you are ready by mail or e-mail (there is no time limit).
5. Receive notice by e-mail with your test results and score.
6. Your certificate, wallet card and letter of recommendation are sent.
7. Your name is added to the AMFPT trainers page.

Since AMFPT is an accredited institution and they had used a unsupervised grading scheme, it can be fairly safe to conclude that IFA's certification procedure has met the general acceptancy of the industry.

### 2.2 Advantages of the current method of testing

The most important advantage of IFA's certification scheme is that it can handle a large number of tests within a short time frame, thus, high throughput. Next to that, it is probably the only testing scheme that allows for payment after the certification process. These advantages make the current process suitable for the first level of certification.

### 2.3 Disadvantages of the current method of testing

The most significant disadvantage of the current method of testing is the inability to measure a person's reasoning and thinking abilities. It is a fact that more often than not, issues regarding inexact science like fitness are not as straight-forward and there are often cases and peer-reviewed research evidence pointing to both directions.

Added on to this, it will certainly make the current method of testing inappropriate for any forms of higher certificate, as that of a “Master Fitness Instructor”. A higher certification has an implication of a somewhat “license to teach”, hence, critical thinking skills are essential.

## **3. Essay Assessment Component and Associated Logistics**

Incorporating or using an essay component in a higher certification process is a direct response to the stated disadvantage of the current testing method.

Although it is true that all forms of testing and assessments are only to satisfy academic requirements, but the means and method of testing and hence, qualifying a certification or qualification will imply the level of academic trainings received. It is a norm that graduation ceremonies for all levels of degrees in American universities are known as “commencement ceremonies”, the nature and means of the degrees makes the differences. For example, the sheer academic and implied differences between a baccalaureate degree and a doctoral degree. Even for some level of qualifications, the nature and means of assessment does have an impact. For example, as masters degree

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by coursework versus a masters degree by research.

In terms of IFA's certification procedure, it may be possible to pass the online test after about 20 hours of rigorous study. This will imply that the certified person has knowledge in the area that he had been certified for but it will certainly be near impossible for this person to have sufficient broadness and depth of knowledge to teach. An essay assessment as a component or as a means of grading for higher certification will be useful to assess a person's broadness and depth of knowledge and critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills are useful as it had been pointed out that there will be reputable research work showing both sides of the coin and in time to come, the person with the "license to teach" will have to consider both sides of argument and make a knowledgeable argument based on his stand. The ability to show broadness and depth of knowledge and critically evaluating the current research work will require many magnitudes more time and effort in learning than passing IFA's online certification test.

Therefore, this proposal advocates the use of essay assessment, as the assessing method or part of the total assessment package, for any form higher certifications that IFA may have.

### 3.1 Applicability of essay assessments

It is realized that assessment solely by means of essay is not applicable in all cases or in all forms of higher certificate. As stated before, essay will only gauge theoretical knowledge and reasoning abilities. So, the question to ask when applying an essay assessment should be "how important is theoretical and research-backed knowledge in the specific area of health and fitness in question?" In this aspect, sports nutrition is an area that theoretical and research-backed knowledge predominates, hence, by proportion, a long essay will be appropriate to serve as the only assessment tool for the certification of "Advanced Sports Nutritionist" or "Senior Sports Nutritionist". However, in the case of a "Master Fitness Instructor", theoretical and research-backed knowledge will need to co-exist with practical experiences, hence, by proportion, a shorter essay will be appropriate as part of the assessment package.

### 3.2 Requirements of essay assessment

It is an unstated requirement that a person aspiring for higher certification should have the initial certification (as a Sports Nutritionist, for example) from IFA and must be current at the time of assessment. As the demand of the assessment is greatly significant, the higher certification awarded should be life-long, provided the initial certification is kept current. For example, the certification of an "Advanced Sports Nutritionist" (by essay assessment) will be current as long as the certification of "Sports Nutritionist" (by the current web-based assessment) be kept current.

As the requirement of just putting together a readable essay is much more demanding than a test by hundreds of multiple choice questions, it may be wise to follow the path

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BSc(Hons)(Biochem), Adv Dip Comp, SN

of American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) to advise that a non-mandatory pre-requisite may be a diploma or an associate baccalaureate degree.

In terms of the length of essay, for a constructive argument to be sufficiently explored, a minimum of three thousand words is necessary. This is the general requirement for an undergraduate essay. Therefore, a minimum of three thousand words and a maximum of three thousand and five hundred words (to ensure conciseness) is the requirement for a shorter essay, such as, as required for that of a “Master Fitness Instructor”. From that, a six thousand to a maximum of six thousand and five hundred word essay will be termed as a long essay, such as, for the requirement of the certification of an “Advanced Sports Nutritionist”.

### 3.3 Grading of essay

It is essential that all essays be graded by qualified persons. It can be safely taken that such an essay be within the academic realm of an undergraduate major, hence, equivalently, all essays can be graded by persons who can grade an undergraduate essay. In another words, all persons who had completed a baccalaureate degree with honours and above (such as, undergoing or had been conferred a masters or doctoral degree) in any forms of health, life and medical sciences will be qualified to grade these essays.

As with all postgraduate theses, it is a routine that the candidate is able to make one amendment to his work, based on comments from the first read by an or a team of assessors.

### 3.4 Assessors logistics

To significantly reduce the demand and possibly bottleneck in the process of assessment by IFA, there is a possibility of looking into pre-grading. By that, it will mean that the candidate, after preparing the essay for submission, have it assessed by two qualified persons and make the amendments before submission. In practice, for example, a person had wrote an essay in preparation for a higher certification by IFA, can have his essay read and graded by two qualified persons (such as, his lecturers from his university) as demonstrating appropriate depth of knowledge and had critically argued his points, before submission to IFA. This method of peer-reviewing of work had been used by a number of esteemed peer-review journals. Alternatively, he can submit the essay to IFA and be graded by IFA, at a cost.

However, as IFA is the certifying agency, it makes sense that IFA to hold the final say to the award of the certification. In order to solve the demand for assessors, IFA should consider establishing fellowships. Fellowship is a common method for seeking “volunteers” in scientific societies or to honour someone that had contributed significantly to the society. The award of a fellowship is a title, in this case, it will be “Fellow of the International Fitness Association” or “FIFA” for short. In this case of essay assessment, FIFAs can act as assessors for these essays.

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In many sense, FIFAs will be the academic or even industrial backbone of IFA. Only the academic aspect will be described here. As FIFAs may be expected to have an impact on IFA, it may be possible to follow the lead of the Royal Society of London that new FIFAs are nominated and peer-approved by existing FIFAs.

As FIFAs are assessors, it will imply that they should be qualified persons by academia. At the same time, they should hold current higher certification awarded by IFA. It might be an appropriate duty of FIFAs to write a review article once every two years for IFA publication. In return, the routine, required re-certification tests for maintaining their certification should be complementary of IFA.

#### **4. A Scenario of Actual Implementation**

For example, John is an IFA-certified Sports Nutritionist and is currently pursuing a Diploma in Exercise Therapy and is contemplating on being certified as a Advanced Sports Nutritionist. The following illustrates the steps:

1. Using his CIN to prove his current certification, he applies and pays for the certification package and at the same time, indicates that he will like to nominate his assessors. It may cost his USD 350.
2. The package arrives in first-class mail with the following items:
  1. a document describing the certification process;
  2. 2 documents describing the assessment criteria and assessor declaration (for John to hand over to his nominated assessors);
  3. a document describing the requirements of the essay, including the nature of subject matter;
  4. a candidate declaration form with non-plagiarism and non-collusion clause; and
  5. a copyright form to allow IFA to edit, distribute and publish his work.
3. John now writes a 6000-word essay.
4. He submits his work to be read and assessed by 2 of his lecturers and make amendments based on their advice.
5. When his assessors views his work as appropriate, they sign the forms as required.
6. John submits a copy of his work by registered mail, together with the assessors declaration forms, the candidate declaration forms and the copyright form to IFA.
7. IFA mails out the package to a FIFA for final approval of certification, together with an assessor declaration form.
8. The FIFA reads the work and sign the assessor declaration form and mail the package back to IFA for the award of certification.
9. Upon receiving the package from the FIFA, IFA emails John to congratulate him of his award and mails out his certification card and a frameable certificate by first-class mail to John.
10. It will be John's duty (as it had always been) for him to maintain his

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Maurice H.T. Ling

BSc(Hons)(Biochem), Adv Dip Comp, SN

certification of a Sports Nutritionist as per normal.

### **5. Benefits Foreseen**

It is expected that an essay component in higher certification awarded by IFA will incur a significant overhead, in terms of workload. However, it is foreseen that IFA will also reap much benefits in proceeding towards the direction as stated in this proposal, both essay assessment scheme and the Fellow of the International Fitness Association awards.

The benefits of pursuing this proposal are as follows:

1. Higher certifications of IFA will be seen by the industry as a mark of excellence;
2. IFA will be seen as a fitness certification agency that is backed by both the industry and the academia;
3. The demand of IFA-certified persons will increase, resulting in increase in value of the certification;
4. Higher certification holders will help to promote the image of IFA;
5. IFA being a market leader in certification;
6. The fellowship represents a pool of motivated and knowledgeable persons that will help in promoting IFA and advancing IFA's cause.

Prepared and Signed by

Maurice H.T. Ling, BSc(Hons)(Biochem), Adv Dip Comp, SN

Prepared for

Chuck J. Krautblatt, CEO, IFA

## **Guidelines for Essay Assessment of the International Fitness Association**

The essay assessment component is implemented by the International Fitness Association (IFA) as part or whole of the certification process for higher certifications by the IFA. Its objectives are to assess,

1. Breadth and depth of current knowledge
2. Ability to think critically through the knowledge
3. Ability to present an argument well-supported by research data

### **Length of Essay Required**

For the certification of Master Fitness Instructor, an essay of between 3000 to 3500 words are required as partial requirement for certification or between 6000 to 6550 words if it is to be total requirement for certification.

For the certification of Senior Sports Nutritionist, an essay of between 6000 to 6500 words are required as total requirement for certification.

The word limits excludes cover page, title, headings, figure captions, figure legends, figure descriptions, footnotes, endnotes and bibliographies. However, this will also mean that they may not be read.

### **Mandatory Requirements of Essay**

The following are the mandatory requirements that all essays must fulfill. Failure to meet any of these requirements may mean failure of the essay. The requirements are as follows:

1. The essay submitted must be within the word limit of the essay appropriate for the certification, as stated in the last section, "Length of Essay Required".
2. The cover page of the essay must contain the following details:
  1. first and last name (as in the standard certification card or certificate),
  2. CIN (as in the standard certification card or certificate),
  3. mailing address,
  4. full title of essay,
  5. number of words,
  6. date,
  7. the following meeting of requirement statement (\* deleting the irrelevant terms): "An essay submitted to the International Fitness Association in \*partial/total requirement of the certification of \*Master Fitness Instructor/Senior Sports Nutritionist",
  8. the following plagiarism and collusion statement: "I, <first and last name as in the standard certification card>, CIN: <CIN as in the

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BSc(Hons)(Biochem), Adv Dip Comp, SN

standard certification card>, hereby declares and signed that I acknowledges that all works, references and assistance used in the preparation of this essay, entitled “<full title of essay>”, had been acknowledged, and I understand that act(s) of plagiarism or collusion will lead to the failure of this essay.”,

9. the following copyright assignation statement: “ I, <first and last name as in the standard certification card>, CIN: <CIN as in the standard certification card>, hereby retains copyright to this essay, entitled “<full title of essay>”, but assigns the International Fitness Association non-revocable rights to publish, edit, and distribute this essay.”
3. The essay should be written in standard English as used in academic writings and therefore expected to be structured appropriately.
4. All external works, references and assistance used should be cited in the bibliography section at the end of the essay and not as footnotes.
5. The bibliography section and the citation styles used through the essay, should be stated at the beginning of the bibliography section and, follow the format accepted by any reputable scientific journals.
6. The essay should demonstrate a considerable width and depth of subject knowledge.
7. The essay should demonstrate critical thinking and reasoning skills, and the ability to present a viewpoint or argument that is well-supported by peer-reviewed research data. For example, information obtained from websites or media publications (except to illustrate an existing case or scenario) is not accepted as peer-reviewed research data.

### **Guidelines for Essay Topics**

While there is not hard and fast rules pertaining to the choice of essay topics, the topic chosen should have enough width for a critical discussion and with sufficient information to sustain the length of the required essay. However, the topic should not be too broad that in depth discussion and analysis is not likely. For example, an essay surveying the different types of weight training methodologies is likely to result in a shallow and wide discussion, which is not a suitable topic as it will usually fail to demonstrate critical thinking and reasoning. On the other hand, an essay comparing two or three training methodologies will be better suited.

Prepared by

Maurice HT Ling, Bsc(Hons)(Biochem), AdvDipComp, SN

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Maurice H.T. Ling

BSc(Hons)(Biochem), Adv Dip Comp, SN