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**The Introduction of English Test for Registration of
Australian Qualified Health Students**

Submission No. 89

(Overseas Trained Doctors)

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Introduction

Registration of overseas health professionals in Australia has until last year (2010) been the responsibility of each state board in Australia. Although similar and mutually recognised, there were inconsistencies between the boards in different states. For example: The former state registration scheme lacked a central national repository of information.

With the introduction of the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency (AHPRA) to support the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for health professions, the different state boards were unified into national boards for each health profession disciplines.

They are: Medicine; Dentistry; Nursing; Pharmacy; Psychology; Physiotherapy; Chiropractic; Osteopathy; Optometry and Podiatry. This is a step in the right direction and allows for one national registration repository which will be consistent anywhere in Australia.

Issues

The new agency AHPRA has issued a directive that states that from 01 July 2010 if a health graduate who studied their health degree at an Australian university or TAFE did not complete his/her high school in Australia or a designated country (i.e. NZ, UK, IRL, CND, USA, SA) must sit and pass an additional rigorous English exam.

The expectation is that they should sit the IELTS tests and achieve an academic minimum score of 7.0 or sit the Occupational English Test (OET) minimum score B. As if this was not challenging enough, this test must also be done in a single sitting.

Discussion

This is an arbitrary unfair and clearly discriminatory stipulation because the purpose of using English exams is to serve as a mean to guarantee that students will have the English language skills necessary to successfully perform academically at the tertiary level and to interact with patients, lecturers, classmates and authorities without any detriment attributable to poor language mastery.

While the English tests serve as indicators and predictors for future suitability in the student's English proficiency surely the acid test is the successful completion of the tertiary health studies they are undertaking.

If AHPRA now requires more validation of English proficiency how did the students pass their studies at Australian tertiary institutions? What level of credibility would the degrees obtained from Australian universities have if they passed people without adequate levels of English proficiency?

This measure is unfair, as the level of difficulty presented to pass either the IELTS Academic or OET tests in one sitting is much higher than the level of difficulty of the English achieved and assessed through study and completion of high school education in one of the designated countries (AU, NZ, UK, IRL, CND, USA, SA), as the two former English exams requires mastery of very complex English competencies, including being confident using post secondary level English.

In fact, according to this regulation, a graduate from an Australian tertiary institution who barely passed their high school English courses in Australia and was continually assessed over a 2 year period in year 11 and 12 would satisfy their English competency requirement. Many students who studied and completed their high school studies in Australia would not pass IELTS Academic or OET four components in one single sitting.

This measure is also unfair because the retrospectively applied requirement affects health students who received admission to Australian health programs under the premise that

they would be able to gain registration and start working in their health profession studied in Australia.

The students who studied high school overseas in non designated countries are considered to have adequate levels of English to get admission to the Australian universities and TAFEs, while paying hefty fees but once they graduate with their health in Australian degree another road block is put in their way.

Just when they want to register and start working in their career, they are considered to have an inadequate level of English.

In order to complete their tertiary studies they are required to use a high level English in different ways such as understanding lectures, writing reports and essays, sitting written exams, making oral presentations, and very importantly, treating patients throughout the majority of the duration of studies during the Clinical component of their studies.

These students have been misled into thinking that they would be able to register immediately after graduation.

Had them been made aware of this requirement they may have opted to study in another country and may not have studied arduous subjects in a health career.

The Commonwealth of Australia Racial Discrimination Act aims to ensure that Australians of all backgrounds are treated equally and have the same opportunities and protects them from discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, and immigration status.

The measure that requires additional English proficiency testing post tertiary study is discriminatory because it is based on their country of high school studies and therefore nation of origin.

Although this submission advocates against the unnecessary English exam evidence, it is important to point out the unsuitability of requesting passing all four skills in a single sitting.

As an example of this, if the student is 85% competent in each one of the English skills (Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking), the probability of passing the four skills in one sitting will be of around 52% (0.85^4). Thus, the requirement of passing all four skills in a single sitting turns out to introduce unnecessary uncertainty, dramatically increases the probability of failure, without adding value to the measurement of competence of any one of the English skills.

Recommendations

Considering the issues above, we propose the following corrective measures:

- Legislation needs to be passed to instruct the AHPRA and the national health Boards to revoke the current requirement to provide English exam evidence.
- If enforcing the requirement of providing English exam evidence persists, this provision should be prospective not retrospectively applied to current successful graduates. This requirement would come into effect starting with health students beginning studies on or after 01 July 2010.
- If still it is decided to continue enforcing the requirement of providing English exam evidence, the way to fulfil this requirement would have to be the same for all students, regardless of the country of high school study and completion. That is, all graduating students would have to sit either IELTS Academic or OET. Additionally, if this decision is taken, the English exams could be passed in more than one sitting.