

*To consider*

## National Licensing Examination

### Issue

- 1 There has been growing debate about the case for a national licensing examination to be taken by all graduates and doctors wishing to join the UK medical register with a licence to practice. We would now like to start a project to evaluate the feasibility of a UK national licensing examination.

### Recommendations

- 2 Council is asked to agree that:
  - a The GMC should indicate its support in principle for a UK national licensing examination, on the basis that it would be a means to address concerns about variation in standards, create a level playing field for all those seeking to join the register with a licence to practise and enable the GMC to set a clear and unified standard for any doctor wishing to practise medicine in the UK. The decision to adopt and implement a national licensing examination will be taken after a full evaluation of the proposal, consideration of research already commissioned and further engagement with key interests.
  - b Council will consider the issue again in 2015, following a period of establishment and research, before a commitment is made to develop and launch a UK national licensing examination.

# National Licensing Examination

## Issue

- 3 The UK has been debating the case for a national licensing examination (NLE) for at least the last ten years. A chronology of key dates is at Annex A.
- 4 Assessment is a key component of undergraduate medical education. In part this is because it is important to test new graduates against required attributes to ensure that patient safety will not be compromised by allowing them to practise. In addition, the nature and content of assessments drives the teaching and learning experienced by students since the students wish to do well in the assessments and it is in the interest of the medical schools that they do so.
- 5 In the UK, each university is responsible for examining its medical students, subject to meeting requirements we set out in *Tomorrow's Doctors 2009*. This is then tested through quality assurance mechanisms. In some other countries (including the USA and Canada), there is a form of national assessment taking the form of one examination which all students or graduates must pass if they wish to be licensed to practise. In the UK, there are national assessments in the Foundation Programme and in specialty training, but not in undergraduate education; and there is a test (the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board or *PLAB* test) for international medical graduates (IMGs) wishing to practise here, but not for UK graduates.

## Recent developments

- 6 Our *Education Strategy 2011-2013* sets out our intention to review the impact of *Tomorrow's Doctors 2009* and then to consider whether to move towards a national examination. This would be in light of the initiative by the Medical Schools Council (MSC) to develop a more systematic approach to using a common bank of examination questions, as well as the work of the MSC and the British Pharmacological Society to develop a discrete Prescribing Safety Assessment (PSA). We have also undertaken an audit of existing assessment practice at all UK medical schools<sup>1</sup>.
- 7 This work is now concluding and it is planned that at least some of the findings will be included in the *State of medical education and practice Report 2014*, due to be published at the end of September 2014.
- 8 Very broadly, the work concludes that very few medical graduates are very poor at medical practice, although there are lower-level concerns about a larger number. However, there are major differences between medical schools in the preparedness

<sup>1</sup> *How are students assessed at medical school across the UK?* GMC, September 2014

and subsequent progression of their graduates. As such the work we have done to date could be seen as supportive of the case for a national licensing examination.

- 9 Our completion of this work coincides with Health Education England (HEE) being charged with finding a solution to the potential problem of the over-subscription to the Foundation Programme. While we believe the case for a UKNLE should be explored irrespective of the outcome of this work, HEE has stressed that it supports the introduction of a national examination to underpin whatever solution is identified to the numbers in the Foundation programme.
- 10 This paper coincides with the completion of our review of the PLAB test. The research accompanying the review, and analysis by Professor Chris McManus and Richard Wakeford, reveals that PLAB candidates underperformed compared with UK graduates in college tests (such as the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians examination and the Membership of the Royal College of General Practitioners examination). This has underlined the desirability of creating a level playing field for all those seeking to join the medical register.
- 11 There has been a change of policy by the Medical Schools Council (and many individual medical schools) – the MSC now appears much more supportive than in the past.
- 12 In summary there is an opportunity to explore the potential of a UK national licensing examination, at a time when there appears to be growing interest and support (including from governments) for such an initiative.

### *The case for a national licensing examination*

- 13 A number of arguments can be put forward for a national licensing examination:
  - a It would provide objective assurance that all those joining the medical register have reached a common standard, and thereby helping to protect patients.
  - b It would bring consistency to the assessment of outcomes of all graduates from UK medical schools (including the new private medical schools that are being developed in the UK).
  - c The UKNLE could also be taken by IMGs, replacing PLAB, and (subject to legal advice) by doctors from the EEA. We are seeking legal advice as to whether passing the UKNLE could be a condition for registration, or for the issuing of licence to practise or, if not legally possible, as a requirement for employment in the NHS, should that be decided by those responsible for the healthcare systems in the different parts of the UK .
  - d It would drive up standards in UK medical schools as failures in the NLE will be a significant driver for quality improvement.

- e It aligns the UK with similar jurisdictions (e.g. USA and Canada).
  - f It could be developed in such a way to give particular assurance to key interests, notably UK employers who, on occasions, express concerns about some aspects of the competence or behaviour of new graduates.
- 14 There are arguments against although many of these are logistical and should prove capable of being overcome).
  - 15 We would need to acknowledge that we recognise the high regard in which UK medical education is seen around the world, and that the variety in teaching and assessment that currently exists will not be suppressed by any new examination or assessment. Moreover the UKNLE should not lead to over assessment of students it would be important to avoid a situation where medical schools ended up simply 'teaching to the exam'.
  - 16 There are also important logistical issues, notably delivering more than 10,000 tests each year (compared to less than 3,000 PLAB tests), and scheduling the test at an appropriate time for medical students that does not divert them from the valuable clinical experience they gain in their final year student assistantship.
  - 17 A further issue will be the cost of such a test and who would pay. The PLAB test fee (part 1 and part 2) has been unchanged for many years at £575. (We plan to review this next year). We will need to consider carefully the costs of setting up an operating a large scale UKNLE.

### *Research proposal*

- 18 We have commissioned the University of Plymouth to undertake a survey and literature review licensing examinations in other countries. We expect to receive a final report by January 2015.
- 19 The research has two objectives:
  - a To gather descriptive information regarding licensing examination, or similar examinations, in countries which are similar to the UK.
  - b To review existing evidence with regard to the impact of licensing examinations or similar examinations.

### *Next steps*

- 20 We are proposing to embark on a project that will initially evaluate the feasibility, and then develop and implement, a UKNLE. If we believe it is viable and worth developing further, we would seek Council's approval for further phases of work in 2015.

- 21** A very rough idea of the timetable for the project if it proceeded to completion is set out below. This may be subject to revision (e.g. if it was considered desirable to give students a full five years notice of being required to take the NLE):

|   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Phase 1: Establishment and research     | October 2014 to June 2015     |
| Council discussion                      | 2 June 2015                   |
| Phase 2: Development                    | July 2015 to June 2016        |
| Phase 3: Piloting and testing           | July 2016 to March 2017       |
| Phase 4: IMG go live (replace PLAB)     | July 2017 at the earliest     |
| Phase 5: UK Grad go live                | February 2018 at the earliest |
| Phase 6: Post implementation evaluation | September to December 2018    |
| Phase 7: Business as usual              | From January 2019             |
| First full review of NLE                | January 2023                  |

- 22** Updates would be provided to Council at the end of each phase.

### *Phase 1*

- 23** Phase 1 (Establishment and Research) will include the following:

- a** Completion and analysis of the research noted in paragraphs 18 and 19 above.
- b** The development of a full project plan and business case, confirmed timetable, appointment of project manager and project team, appointment of project board, approach advisory board members and consider legal/legislative requirements and project governance.
- c** Further research and visits to assessment institutions, engagement with PLAB team and governance, probable first meetings of project board and advisory board.

### *Budget and resource commitment*

- 24** For Phase 1, we are proposing to make use of existing staff resources (with limited backfill where necessary). We have committed £40,000 to the research noted above and will make provision in the 2015 budget for work developing the business case.
- 25** We will also make provision in 2015 for the initial work around the second (development) phase of the project, but will only draw down on this once Council has

given a commitment to go ahead with the adoption and implementation of the NLE. The resource requirement will be finalised once the business case for the whole project is completed.

## Supporting information

### How this issue relates to the corporate strategy and business plan

26 Strategic Aim Two: to help raise standards in medical education and practice.

### How the issues support the principles of better regulation

27 The overall purpose of a national licensing examination will be to increase the confidence of patients and the public in the quality of the medical profession in the UK.

### How the action will be evaluated

28 This is a long term project but the outline project plan envisages post implementation evaluation shortly after the NLE goes live to all applicants to the UK register. As with the PLAB test, we would also envisage regular periodic review of examination, probably every four to five years.

### What engagement approach has been used to inform the work (and what further communication and engagement is needed)

29 We have had extensive discussions with the Medical Schools Council, UK governments, Health Education England and NHS Education Scotland in the early development of this project. The project as a whole, and particularly phase 1, will involve further and detailed discussion.

### What equality and diversity considerations relate to this issue

30 As we are well aware from recent events involving the RCGP, we will need to be extremely mindful of equality and diversity considerations in developing a national licensing examination. We will wish to consider this carefully in the project plan, undertaking a full equality assessment, and building on the experience and expertise of the GMC in delivering the PLAB examination for many years.

**If you have any questions about this paper please contact: Martin Hart, Assistant Director - Education and Standards, [mhart@gmc-uk.org](mailto:mhart@gmc-uk.org), 020 7189 5408.**

## Recent chronology of a UK National Licensing Examination

This chronology summarises some of the main events in the debate over the case for a national licensing examination in the UK.

- 2005 GMC hosted international conference *Medical Education: From Here to Where?* The conference included a session devoted to the question of a national examination, addressed by the US National Board of Medical Examiners.
- Subsequent closed seminar between GMC Education Committee, DH Officials and NBME revealed limited support: DH very concerned about cost and declined to support legislative change; medical schools concerned about loss of ability to innovate; medical students concerned about burden of assessment.
- 2006 GMC informal document on Strategic Proposals for Assessment concluded “introduction of a national examination may be the most robust way forward but shared questions offer a good compromise between status quo and more extensive change”.
- 2006 *Good Doctors, Safer Patients* recommended a national examination to apply to all seeking registration no matter the country in which they qualified.
- 2006 Medical Schools Council establish Assessment Alliance to encourage sharing of question items in medical school finals.
- 2009 Improving Selection to the Foundation Programme (ISFP) project led to introduction of Situational Judgement Tests and Educational Performance Measure to rank applicants to the Foundation Programme.
- 2010 GMC Education Strategy 2011-2013 set out our intention to review the impact of *Tomorrow's Doctors 2009* and then to consider whether to move towards a national examination (completing 2014).

- 2011 GMC started review of PLAB test (completing 2014).
- 2012 NHS Future Forum recommended GMC should lead discussions on desirability of a national examination.
- 2012 Law Commission consultation asked whether powers of regulators should extend to national assessment of students.
- 2013 Francis Report noted that UK national exam had been considered and that review was planned.
- 2013 Shape of Training Report made case for moving point of full registration with GMC.
- 2014 HEE-led options appraisal on medical education notes opportunity to introduce national licensing examination.