### Action
For decision.

### Purpose
Our reduced capacity for PLAB 2, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in an ongoing backlog with significant numbers of applicants waiting for a place.

As part of our COVID-19 recovery work, we’ve considered how we might add flexibility for international medical graduates (‘IMGs’) across our registration framework without compromising standards. We’ve completed a review of the knowledge test and clinical skills components of ten overseas registration/licensing exams. We’ve identified three exams that we could accept as an alternative to PLAB.

Amending our registration framework to accept overseas registration/licensing exams as alternatives to PLAB will support moving some doctors out of the PLAB backlog. We could also explore whether this should be a permanent change to our registration framework for the future.

### Decision trail
Considered at the R&R COVID-19 programme board.

### Recommendation(s)
- **a** To approve the list of three overseas registration/licensing exams as acceptable evidence of knowledge and skills for registration.
- **b** To agree whether any change should become a permanent change to the registration framework.

### Annexes
N/A

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Background – COVID-19 recovery

1 Section 21B of the Medical Act 1983 (as amended) allows us to determine the evidence we accept from IMGs to satisfy us that they have the necessary knowledge & skills for registration. Nearly half of all IMGs currently sit the PLAB exam to demonstrate that they have such knowledge and skills.

2 In March 2020, as part of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we cancelled all PLAB 2 exams. Following government guidance on social distancing, most PLAB 1 exams restarted in June and we restarted a socially distant PLAB 2 in August. Our reduced capacity for PLAB 2 has resulted in an ongoing backlog, with significant numbers of applicants waiting for a place.

3 To provide IMG applicants continued access to registration and to support the flow of doctors into the UK workforce, we’ve focused on where we can add flexibility across our registration framework without compromising standards. We’ve completed a review of the knowledge test and clinical skills components of ten overseas registration/licensing exams, to assess whether we could accept any of them as an alternative to PLAB.

Our approach

4 We developed four principles to assess the acceptability of overseas registration/licensing exams:

   a  The exam must have been sat in English.
   b  The exam must have both a knowledge test and clinical skills component.
   c  The clinical skills component must be an OSCE style exam that includes stations that involve interactions with patients/role players.
   d  The exam must map against the PLAB blueprint.

5 We assessed ten overseas registration/licensing exams against these principles as well as mapping the content, format and standard setting against that used for PLAB. For the content, we mapped against the three main domains and six key topics for PLAB.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main domains</th>
<th>Key topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Data gathering including history taking</td>
<td>▪ Child health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Clinical management</td>
<td>▪ Ethical and professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Communication skills</td>
<td>situations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Mental health</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Reproductive health</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Older adult health</td>
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Agenda item 2 – Overseas registration/licensing exams

| ▪ A seriously ill patient (emergency situation) |

Exams that meet our criteria

6 Following the mapping, we identified three overseas registration/licensing exams that meet our requirements:

a The Medical Council of Canada qualifying examination (in English only).

b The United States Medical Licensing examination.

c The Australian Medical Council examination.

Exams that didn’t meet our criteria

7 We assessed seven other exams for countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean against the PLAB blueprint. The reasons they were unacceptable include:

a The format of the clinical skills component wasn’t a full OSCE.

b The exam didn’t have both a knowledge test and clinical skills component.

c The standard setting for one or both components was not comparable to the PLAB exam.

d The number of OSCE stations was too low to provide a comparable level of validity and reliability to the PLAB standard.

e The content of the exam didn’t cover all the key topics of PLAB.

8 We’re currently seeking further information from overseas medical regulators and exam providers to see if there are other exams we’ve not yet considered.

Other registration criteria

9 To ensure comparability with the PLAB pathway, we identified some additional registration criteria that would apply to any applicants using one of these alternative registration/licensing exams as evidence of knowledge and skills for registration.

Validity period

10 Applicants must have passed the alternative exam within the last two-years. This is the same validity period used for PLAB exams. For any applicants who’ve passed an overseas exam beyond the two-year period, we have an established process to allow applicants to provide us with alternative evidence that they have kept their knowledge and skills up to date since they passed the exam.
This includes providing structured references from supervising consultants for recent posts the doctor held or currently holds.

**Limits on the number of attempts**

11 The three overseas exams we identified have a limit on the number of attempts that is comparable to PLAB. On that basis, we’re not proposing to add any further requirements over and above those already in place for each overseas exam.

**Experience**

12 Applicants could only use an acceptable overseas registration/licensing exam as evidence of knowledge and skills for registration. They would still need to provide additional evidence of experience including completion of an internship in accordance with our existing policy. This is also a requirement for doctors who use the PLAB exam as evidence of knowledge and skills.

**Eligible applicants and implementation**

13 We surveyed 5286 doctors who’ve passed PLAB 1 and are awaiting a place to sit PLAB 2. We identified 63 doctors who’ve sat one of the three exams although we don’t know if all of them will satisfy the validity period. Now that PLAB 1 exams are running again in most countries, we anticipate that more applicants will enter the PLAB 2 backlog who could potentially benefit from this change.

14 We’re confident that we could put in place an interim application process before the end of the year for doctors in the PLAB backlog, who would be eligible to use overseas registration/licensing exams to demonstrate knowledge and skills for registration.

15 Each application would be considered by an Assistant Registrar. Applicants will also have to undergo our usual checks for primary source verification, including verifying a pass in one of the overseas registration/licensing exams.

16 Our recent discussions with the relevant overseas regulators and exam providers indicate that they have cancelled sessions or are adapting the clinical skills component of their exam in response to the pandemic. The Australian regulator is piloting an online video conference model and the USMLE has cancelled all its clinical skills sessions until June 2021. We’re not proposing to accept any applications where the doctor presents a recent pass in the Australian exam using the online conference model until we have assurances about the validity and reliability of this approach. We will continue to monitor these developments.
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17 **Recommendation:** that the board approve the three overseas registration/licensing exams as acceptable evidence of knowledge and skills for registration.

**A permanent change?**

18 Our work on alternative registration/licensing exams has primarily focused on identifying acceptable exams and implementing this change on an interim basis to manage the PLAB 2 backlog. We expect that any interim change will need to remain in place until at least October 2023 at the earliest.

19 This change could be implemented as a permanent one. We could develop a new pathway to registration where IMGs could use a recent pass in one of these exams to demonstrate knowledge and skills for registration.

20 The advantage of a new examination pathway is that it could provide a faster registration process for some IMG doctors. It links into our Routes to Registration and Workforce programmes which are looking at where we can add more flexibility into the registration framework for IMG doctors while maintaining standards and robust assurance. It may also be difficult to suggest that other licensing/registration exams are acceptable evidence for registration in the short term but not in the longer term. A permanent change would require some additional work to develop policy and operational processes, but these could be done alongside the implementation of the interim approach outlined above for those doctors currently in the PLAB backlog.

21 A disadvantage to making this change permanent is that some IMG doctors may be granted registration without completing an examination that has been designed specifically around UK practice, ethics and legislation. This could expose them to some risks and challenges as they begin to practise in the UK. Also, if we were to consider routinely accepting other alternative overseas exams, a consequence might be that doctors choose to take an overseas exam rather than PLAB/MLA (when its introduced) due to the cost being lower or easier to access.

22 Any permanent change would need an assurance model to reassess the acceptability of each overseas registration/licensing exam periodically to ensure that they continue to meet the criteria we’ve applied. This would include monitoring any amendments that have been made to the exams in response to the pandemic, but also on a rolling basis to ensure that the list of acceptable overseas registration/licensing exams continues to reflect our standards and requirements.

23 **Recommendation:** To agree whether any change to accept alternative overseas registration/licensing exams should apply to the COVID-19 PLAB 2 backlog only or become a permanent change to our registration framework.
Equality, diversion and inclusion

24 As we’ve carried out this work, we acknowledge our duties under the public sector equality duty. We understand that PLAB examination cancellations have adversely affected groups of IMG applicants with common protected characteristics, including race and ethnicity. Our recommendation to accept overseas registration/licensing exams to meet our evidence requirements for registration will have benefits for some of those applicants including, reducing delays in applications for registration and removing costs associated with taking PLAB.