To note

**Amending the acceptable overseas qualification criteria**

**Issue**

1. The current criteria to decide what constitutes an acceptable overseas qualification for registration were agreed in 2010. The application of these criteria have had unforeseen effects and have led to complaints and legal challenges.

**Recommendations**

2. The Strategy and Policy Board is asked to note:

   a. The amendments to the current acceptable overseas qualification criteria to improve transparency, operational efficiency and fairness.

   b. The proposal for a working group to undertake a wider review of the acceptability of overseas qualifications, taking into account the changes in worldwide medical education and other factors including the imminent award of UK qualifications gained overseas.  

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1. The first cohort of Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia (NUMed) students will graduate in 2014.
Amending the acceptable overseas qualification criteria

Issue

3 The Registration and Revalidation Directorate’s work over the last three years has hugely increased our understanding of worldwide medical education and the challenges regulators face in deciding whether to accept specific qualifications. This increased knowledge, and our work with the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME)/Avicenna and Electronic Certification of Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG), has led us to the conclusion that we need a fundamental review of our approach to overseas qualifications.

4 This cannot be done quickly or solely in-house because of the complex nature and constantly changing face of worldwide medical education. We have therefore recommended that a working group is established to do this work as soon as possible.

5 This paper proposes some minor interim changes. These will increase operational efficiency, reduce assessment and decision making times and increase transparency and fairness in how we apply the current criteria.

6 We considered a number of options before agreeing on the proposals that follow. One option was to keep the current criteria and focus on a fundamental review. Another option was to give the Registrar discretion when considering the acceptability of a qualification. Both options require substantial work, time and engagement.

7 The Registration and Revalidation Senior Management Team has discussed the interim changes and agreed that they will immediately reduce the operational burden, scope for complaints and successful challenges. The Strategy and Policy Board is asked to note the interim changes and the recommendation to set up a working group to carry out a fundamental review of this area. Annex C shows the current criteria, with the agreed amendments added as tracked changes.

Agreed changes

*Using directories other than Avicenna (criterion a(i))*

Agreed: that we remove all specific references to the Avicenna Directory and refer instead to ‘GMC specified directories’

8 The current criteria refer exclusively to a listing in the Avicenna Directory for Medicine. Difficulties with updating Avicenna and the merger of the Avicenna and International Medical Education Directories mean that we need to introduce

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2 The references are taken from paragraph 4 of Annex A.
more flexibility so that other directories can be used. The guidance accompanying the criteria will specify which directories we use.

**Adding additional routes to ‘otherwise acceptable’ (criterion b)**

Agreed: that a qualification will be ‘otherwise acceptable’ where the only reason it is not listed in a specified directory is because the qualification was awarded by an institution that either no longer exists or no longer delivers medical education and the GMC can be satisfied as to the veracity of the individual’s qualification.

9 A number of exceptions to a listing in the Avicenna Directory are included in the current criteria and we have identified one more exception that needs to be addressed. In each case the qualification must also satisfy all of the other criteria for an acceptable overseas qualification.

10 Both the Avicenna and IMED Directories list details of current medical education providers. Institutions no longer awarding medical qualifications cannot have a listing even if all the remaining criteria are met. It was never intended that such qualifications would be excluded based solely on the absence of a Directory listing.

11 The accompanying guidance will explain that, for this exception, we will take the following steps to verify a qualification:

   a Ask for the original certificate of qualification

   b Check an institution is still in existence, but no longer delivers medical education

   c Use other specified databases to check the status of the institution at the time the qualification was awarded or when it closed or stopped delivering medical education

   d Make enquiries with relevant third parties either in the UK or overseas.

**Physical address (criterion c)**

Agreed: that the institution listed in a GMC specified directory must have sufficient contact details (address or email address or fax number or telephone number) to allow verification.

12 The criterion currently requires the institution awarding the qualification to have ‘a physical address within the country under whose auspices the qualification is issued’. This address must be included in the Avicenna Directory.

13 We intended this to be used to assure us that the awarding body was genuine, especially where it has overseas campuses. However, it did not allow for the fact that there is considerable variation throughout the world in how addresses are used, or that most qualifications are now verified electronically. The critical
factor is that we need to have a reliable way of contacting the awarding body to check information and qualifications.

5,500 hours over three years, or four academic years (criterion d)

Agreed: that the qualification must have been awarded after a programme of study comprising at least 5,500 hours over a minimum period of three years.\(^3\)

14 This criterion states that a qualification ‘must have been awarded after a programme of study comprising at least 5,500 hours over a minimum period of three years, or four academic years full time equivalent study’. This is based on the provisions of the European Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications\(^4\) which specifies that the course of study for a primary European qualification must be over a minimum period of 5,500 hours or six years.

15 Requiring a minimum of six years study would stop a considerable number of overseas applicants from being eligible for registration. We felt that setting the minimum at 5,500 hours over a reasonable period of study, a minimum of three years, is more appropriate. The current wording is clear in terms of the number of hours required over three years, but the reference to a four year programme has led some to suggest that a four year programme would be acceptable regardless of the number of hours completed. We have removed reference to four years to be clear that the minimum period of study is 5,500 hours over a minimum of three years of study.

16 This interim change is made with reference to the current European Directive. The fundamental review will fully consider the issue again in the context of the new Directive which will require 5,500 hours and five years of study.

Exception to 50% of study requirement (criterion e)

Agreed: that the only exception to this rule is where the awarding body relocates to another country making it impossible for specific cohorts of graduates to have completed at least 50% of the standard course of study in the country where the institution is based when their qualification is awarded.

17 Currently a minimum of 50% of the standard course of study leading to the primary medical qualification must be done in the country that awards the qualification. We introduced this requirement to deal with a number of practices including (but not limited to) students who fail at one institution and transfer to and qualify at an institution elsewhere after a short period of study; students who transfer to a different institution at a late stage (often solely for the clinical

\(^3\) Changes to Directive 2005/36/EC may affect this clause and we may have to increase the length requirement. However, it is envisaged that this is something that can be addressed by the working group in the fundamental review of this area of work.

\(^4\) Article 24(2) Directive 2005/36/EC
component of the programme) but do not spend any time in the country awarding the qualification⁵.

18 We have identified some rare cases where an applicant was not able to spend enough time in the country of qualification due to exceptional circumstances. For example, where a university was established across the border due to political unrest, but relocated to the home country at a later date. To address this we need to introduce an exception to the requirement that the qualification must not have involved a programme of study where more than 50% (compared to the standard duration of the qualification) has been done outside the country that awarded the qualification.

**Clarifying terminology**

19 We need to clarify some terms in addition to those already defined in the criteria guidance to avoid any misinterpretation. These are set out at Annex D and will be added to the current guidance.

**Transitional arrangements**

20 These changes will come into effect from 1 March 2014 and will apply to all applicants for registration with an overseas qualification from that date.

21 There are likely to be applicants who we have advised that their primary medical qualification was not acceptable at the time of their enquiry, but which may be acceptable after the proposed changes to the criteria. We will review our data to identify these applicants, and from 1 March 2014 begin contacting them to highlight the changes. Any new applications from these doctors will be assessed on the amended criteria. The relevant application web pages will be updated and information about the changes will feature on the home page of our website, as well as on emails from the Contact Centre and relevant operational teams.

22 The interim changes will add clarity and widen the scope of the current criteria. We do not think that any more transitional arrangements are needed once these changes have been made.

23 Enquiries or complaints arising from these interim changes will be monitored and responded to in line with current policy. We may use information from enquiries or complaints to inform the working group’s approach.

⁵ From June 2014, the GMC will be accepting qualifications delivered by UK medical schools wholly overseas (NUMED for example) and this will undermine the organisation’s position in relation to this criterion. Again, it is envisaged that this is something that can be addressed by the working group in the fundamental review of this area of work.
Supporting information

How this issue relates to the corporate strategy and business plan

24 Strategic aim 1 of the Business Plan states that we will continue to register only those doctors that are properly qualified and fit to practise and to increase the utility of the medical register.

How the issues support the principles of better regulation

25 The changes set out in this paper will have a positive impact on internal efficiency. The decision making process will be more streamlined, ultimately reducing time spent administering applications and appeals.

What equality and diversity considerations relate to this issue

26 The requirement to hold an acceptable overseas qualification applies specifically to international medical graduates. This requirement is enshrined in primary legislation. This paper seeks to develop and clarify the agreed criteria in order to improve transparency and consistency.

27 We do not expect any group to be disadvantaged by these interim changes. We will monitor the impact and include this learning in the equality assessment that will be part of the fundamental review of our approach to overseas qualifications.

If you have any questions about this paper please contact: Jane Durkin Assistant Director - Registration & Revalidation, jdurkin@gmc-uk.org, 0161 923 6685.
Summary of how the criteria have evolved

1  This annex explains how the definition of an acceptable overseas qualification has evolved from pre 1995 to 2010.

GMC maintained list

2  Before 1995 the GMC kept its own list of overseas qualifications which it considered acceptable for the purposes of sitting the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) test and applying for GMC registration.

The World Health Organisation Directory of Medical Schools

3  In 1995 due to the growing number of medical schools worldwide, we introduced the requirement for all acceptable overseas medical qualifications to be listed in the World Health Organisation (WHO) Directory of Medical Schools.

A set of criteria

4  In 2005/06 investigations revealed questionable links between overseas campuses and foreign medical schools and possible fraudulent activity in the award of qualifications by some WHO listed medical schools.

5  We decided to introduce additional criteria for what constituted an acceptable overseas qualification to make the requirements more robust and to give an extra level of assurance. The 2006 criteria required an overseas qualification to meet the following requirements under section 21B(2) of the Act:

6  To be acceptable, a qualification must have:

   a  Been awarded by an institution listed in the WHO Directory of Medical Schools or otherwise accepted by the GMC.

   b  Been awarded by an institution which has a physical address included in the WHO Directory.
c  Been awarded after a course of study comprising of at least 5,500 hours or four years full time equivalent study.

d  Not involved a course of study undertaken wholly or substantially outside the country that awarded the primary medical qualification (PMQ).

e  Not involved a course of study undertaken wholly or substantially by correspondence.

7  In applying these new criteria, the Registrar refused applicants entry onto the Register where their qualifications did not satisfy the criteria. A number of these decisions were overturned by Registration Appeals Panels, prompting a further review of the criteria.

8  In July 2010 the following revised version of the criteria was approved and implemented. For a qualification to be deemed acceptable, it must:

a  Be a primary medical qualification in allopathic medicine that has been:

   i  Awarded by an institution listed the Avicenna Directory for Medicine, OR

   ii  Otherwise acceptable to the GMC, AND

   iii  Is currently acceptable to the GMC.

b  Where a qualification is not listed on the Avicenna Directory it will be otherwise acceptable to the GMC only where:

   i  The reason that it is not listed is either because the country, under whose auspices the qualification is issued, is not recognised by the United Nations or the qualification is a primary European Qualification, AND, in either case,

   ii  The qualification satisfies all of the other criteria for an acceptable overseas qualification.

c  Where relevant, the institution listed in the Avicenna Directory must have a physical address within the country under whose auspices the qualification is issued.

1 Dr FH RAP 24 June 2009; Dr JP RAP 5 July 2009; Dr KT RAP 21 August and 24 and 25 October 2009; Dr PG RAP 29 July 2010
d It must have been awarded after a programme of study comprising at least 5,500 hours over a minimum period of three years, or four academic years full time equivalent study. For this purpose a programme of study will:

i Exclude study at an institution where the student was considered unsuitable to qualify as a doctor and has either been refused graduation or perhaps offered an alternative degree title.

ii Exclude study at an institution which is not currently, or was not at the time of the student's studies there, acceptable to the GMC.

e It must not have involved a programme of study where more than 50% of that study (compared to the standard duration of the qualification) has been undertaken outside the country that awarded the qualification.

f It must not have involved following a programme of study where more than 25% of that study (compared to the standard duration of the qualification calculated using total hours of study) has been undertaken by distance learning. Distance learning will include learning by correspondence, using the internet or online learning methods, self directed learning and any training or learning which is undertaken other than on a face-to-face basis.

g Where the qualification held by an applicant fails to satisfy any one or more of the above criteria that application must be refused (on the grounds that the applicant does not hold an acceptable overseas qualification).
Issues with the current criteria

1 This annex highlights examples of issues and unintended consequences arising from the wording and application of the current criteria.

Criterion a - limitations arising from sole reliance on the WHO and Avicenna Directories

2 The Avicenna Directory replaced the World Health Organization (WHO) World Directory of Medical Schools. In August 2007 the University of Copenhagen took responsibility for developing and administering the new directory with the assistance of the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME).

3 The University faced a number of challenges in taking on this work including:

a Many entries in the WHO Directory had not been updated within the previous decade and in some cases longer.

b Funding and resource challenges faced by the University and WHO (who continued to be involved as a partner) means that updates to entries have been slower than anticipated.

c Historically both the WHO and Avicenna Directories have only listed medical schools whereas qualifications tend to be issued by the awarding body (the university). This is especially problematic for countries that frequently change the names of institutions and change affiliations between medical schools and universities.

4 The above factors, combined with a limited search facility for the online database, has resulted in some qualifications which meet all other criteria being assessed as unacceptable.

Criterion b - accepting qualifications which are not listed in Avicenna

5 In establishing the criteria we recognised that there are certain cases where the medical schools will not be listed in Avicenna. We specified two exceptions to a
listing in Avicenna to deal with such cases. Since the introduction of the criteria, a number of other circumstances have come to light. For example, the Avicenna Directory does not include closed medical schools or universities that may still exist but are no longer awarding medical qualifications. This has led to qualifications being assessed as unacceptable even though they meet all other criteria and there is no scope for them to be included in the Directory.

**Criterion c - Physical Address**

6 A number of Avicenna listings only have reference to a city or town, with no other address information. The criteria require listings in Avicenna to have a ‘physical address’ in order to enable verification.

7 Council did not specify what it meant by a physical address but, in light of one specific case which led to this requirement being introduced, it was taken to mean an address similar to that required for the UK including a building name or number and a post code. This led to some difficulties including with the University of Sydney’s campus which is so large that it has its own postcode. It therefore does not have a street name or city/town listed in Avicenna.

**Criterion d - 5,500 hours over three years, or four academic years**

8 The 5,500 hour requirement reflects the minimum number of hours study specified in the Directive for a European qualification. As currently drafted the criteria has been interpreted by some as requiring either 5,500 hours of study over three years or a minimum of four years academic study (even where the number of hours study is less than 5,500).

**Criterion e - 50% of study in awarding country**

9 There have been a small number of cases where applicants are unable to meet the requirement to complete a minimum of 50% of the standard course of study in the country that awarded their qualification because the institution has relocated along with all students. The 50% requirement was intended to prevent ‘graduation tourism’ where some students repeatedly fail and move from institution to institution until they obtain a qualification. It was not intended to impact on students where their awarding institution relocated following civil/political unrest, the redefining of territories and national boundaries and natural occurrences such as hurricanes and volcanoes.
The revised criteria

1 This annex sets out the new criteria using the 2010 criteria and incorporates (as track changes) the agreed changes identified in the main paper.

2013 criteria

2 The changes agreed by Registration and Revalidation Senior Management Team mean the criteria will read as follows:

For a qualification to be deemed acceptable:

a It must be a primary medical qualification in allopathic medicine that has been:

i has been awarded by an institution listed in the Avicenna Directory for Medicine in a directory or directories specified by the GMC;

ii OR

iii otherwise acceptable to the GMC,

AND in all cases

iv is currently acceptable to the GMC.

b Where a qualification is not listed on the Avicenna Directory in the specified directory or directories it will be otherwise acceptable to the GMC only where the reason that it is not listed is because

i The reason that it is not listed is either because the country, under whose auspices the qualification is issued, is not recognised by the United Nations; OR or

ii the qualification is a primary European Qualification; OR
the qualification was awarded by an institution that either no longer exists or no longer delivers medical education and the GMC can be satisfied as to the veracity of the individual’s qualification.

AND, in each of the above circumstances the qualification satisfies all of the other criteria for an acceptable overseas qualification, in either case,

ii. The qualification satisfies all of the other criteria for an acceptable overseas qualification.

a Where relevant, the institution listed in the Avicenna Directory specified directory or directories must have sufficient contact details (address OR email address OR fax number OR telephone number) to allow verification of the qualifications it has issued, a physical address within the country under whose auspices the qualification is issued.

b It must have been awarded after a programme of study comprising at least 5,500 hours over a minimum period of three years, or 5,500 hours over four academic years full-time equivalent study. For this purpose a programme of study will:

i. Exclude study at an institution where the student was considered unsuitable to qualify as a doctor and has either been refused graduation or perhaps offered an alternative degree title.

ii. Exclude study at an institution which is not currently, or was not at the time of the student’s studies there, acceptable to the GMC.

c It must not have involved a programme of study where more than 50% of that study (compared to the standard duration of the qualification) has been undertaken outside the country that awarded the qualification. The only circumstance where this criterion may be disapplied is where the awarding body relocates to another country making it impossible for specific cohorts of graduates to have completed at least 50% of the standard course of study in the country where the institution is based when their qualification is awarded.

d It must not have involved following a programme of study where more than 25% of that study (compared to the standard duration of the qualification calculated using total hours of study) has been undertaken by distance learning. Distance learning will include learning by correspondence, using the internet or online learning methods, self directed learning and any training or learning which is undertaken other than on a face-to-face basis.
Where the qualification held by an applicant fails to satisfy any one or more of the above criteria that application must be refused (on the grounds that the applicant does not hold an acceptable overseas qualification).
Annex D

Clarification of terminology to be added to guidance

1 This annex outlines the terminology and explanations that will be added to the existing guidance.

Terminology and explanation

Defining an institution

2 The current criteria state that to be acceptable, an overseas primary medical qualification must have been ‘awarded by an institution listed on the Avicenna directory’.

Agreed: that in using the term ‘institution’ the GMC is referring to ‘medical schools and colleges; awarding bodies; universities; and places of study.’

Defining a qualification

3 The current criteria do not define what is meant by the term ‘qualification’.

Recommendation: that in using the term ‘qualification’ the GMC is referring to ‘the satisfactory completion of an acceptable course of study at a relevant institution\(^1\) leading to the award of a degree entitling the holder to practise medicine as a doctor.’

Defining a ‘listing’

4 The current criteria do not define what is meant by the term ‘listing’ with reference to an institution’s entry in a GMC specified Directory.

Recommendation: that a listing in the GMC’s specified directories must include, as a minimum:

\(^1\) All medical schools, colleges, awarding bodies, universities and places of study listed in a GMC specified Directory
- Name and country of institution; (or, where different)
- Name and country of awarding body/ place of study; and
- Sufficient contact details for verification.