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Mr Colin Waldron
Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency
c/o National Registration and Accreditation Implementation Project
PO Box 2089
Woden ACT 2606

Dear Mr Waldron

I am writing to provide you with an update on the Occupational English Test (OET), which is currently endorsed for the assessment of English language proficiency by the governing bodies of 12 health professions at state and national level in Australia, seven in New Zealand and one in Singapore. The OET is owned by the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne, a public entity established under Victorian Government legislation that is recognised for its contribution to community education for 62 years. The test is developed and delivered by the OET Centre, a business unit of CAE.

The OET was designed in the 1980s by Professor Tim McNamara of the University of Melbourne, under contract to the Australian Federal Government. It is a specific purpose test designed specifically to evaluate the English language competence of people who have trained as medical and health professionals in another country and who wish to gain registration to practise their profession in Australia.

The OET test bank provides for seven of the professions covered by APHRA and five others: dentistry, dietetics, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, optometry, pharmacy, physiotherapy, podiatry, radiography, speech pathology and veterinary science. Nursing, medicine and dentistry currently provide the largest numbers of candidates. The ADC requires all overseas trained dentists to take the OET. All four language skills are tested – listening, speaking, reading and writing – with an emphasis on contextualised communication for professional purposes in the workplace. The Speaking and Writing sub-tests are specific to each profession, while the Listening and Reading sub-tests are common to all candidates. One of the features of the OET is its consistently high reliability indices: Listening 0.93, Reading 0.89, Writing 0.90, Speaking 0.91. Detailed information on the test and its assessment is provided in Attachment 1.

The test is administered in up to 40 venues worldwide according to demand – there are no wait lists, venue capacity is increased in line with demand. To ensure that OET Centre's rigorous test administration standards are upheld and to protect IP, the OET Centre now has a Services Agreement with an Australian company for the global administration of tests. Staff of this organisation were trained by OET Centre management and spot audits are carried out. Since CAE took over administration of the OET in 2004 significant improvements have been made, resulting in an average annual increase in candidature of 30%, with over 10,000 candidates taking the test in 2009. The number of administrations has increased from three in 2004 to seven this year, with ten scheduled for 2010. The assessment turnaround period has been reduced from over eight weeks to less than three weeks. A purpose built website ensures administrative efficiency and effective communication with candidates, who register and pay online. Assessing authorities can register for secure access to the site to check candidate results.

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DIAC recognises the OET as a measure of "Proficient English", awarding 25 points for migration purposes, and has approved the stringent ID check processes in place (refer Attachment 2). To date DIAC has not reported any instances of identity fraud among visa applications from successful OET candidates. The value of specific purpose testing is recognised in industries such as aviation. In line with a suggestion made by DIAC's Director of Skilled Migration that we develop specific purpose tests for other professions we are negotiating with relevant assessing authorities.

In May this year presentations were made to staff of both the UK General Dental Council and Health Professions Council and recently an application was lodged with the UK Border Agency to have the OET listed as a recognised test of English language proficiency for immigration purposes. For this process it was necessary to link the OET to the Common European Framework, which is now the benchmark for language testing. A 2007 study benchmarked the OET against IELTS [ref. Attachment 3].

The OET Centre has a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Melbourne for OET research, materials supply and technical support and is their industry partner on a major research project, funded by the Australian Research Council, that is directed to aligning OET criteria and passing standards even more closely with the requirements of professional stakeholders. The OET Centre commissions ongoing validation research and has been frequently reviewed and analysed in the literature over the past 20 years. A research overview is provided in Attachment 1, p.12.

Representatives from the existing health profession Regulatory Authorities, DEEWR and DIAC contribute to the continual improvement of the OET Centre's work via The OET Stakeholder Group.

The Executive Manager, OET & Educational Research, Fel Bisiani, would welcome the opportunity to answer any further enquiries you may have and can be contacted at felb@cae.edu.au or on 0439 307 594.

Yours sincerely

Denise O'Brien
CEO CAE

NOTE: Additional information about CAE can be found at <http://www.cae.edu.au> and about the OET Centre at www.occupationalenglishtest.org.

Attachments:

1. OET Information Booklet
2. OET ID checks
3. Executive Summary, OET/IELTS Benchmarking Study

c.c.

Mr Peter Allen, Chair, Agency Management Committee
Dr John Lockwood, Chair, Dental Board of Australia
Dr Joanna Flynn, Chair, Medical Board of Australia
Ms Anne Copeland, Chair, Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia
Mr Stephen Marty, Chair, Pharmacy Board of Australia
Mr Glenn Ruscoe, Chair, Physiotherapy Board of Australia
Mr Jason Warnock, Chair, Podiatry Board of Australia