

Guide to the review: Key aspects of the consultation

February 2023

Updating the general registration competencies – public consultation

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Background

1. About us

The Psychology Board of Australia (the Board) and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) regulate psychologists through the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (National Scheme). Our primary role is public protection, and we adopt a risk-based approach to regulation.

2. About the consultation

We are reviewing the current competencies for general registration and are proposing to reorganize, update and improve them. The proposal is outlined in the [Public consultation paper](#). Details on how to provide feedback to our consultation can be found in the [consultation paper](#).

This *Guide to the review* provides information about the key aspects of our proposal, and if it is approved, how it will affect you.

3. What are competencies and how do we use them?

Competencies are benchmarks that describe the knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours, values, and other attributes that enable a person to act effectively and to a defined standard in a professional practice situation associated with a professional role.

Competencies are used within an **educational context** - such as when undertaking a psychology qualification - and a **regulatory context**, when setting the minimum threshold competency necessary to practise effectively and safely as a psychologist in Australia.

Who uses competencies?	How do they use competencies?
Accreditation agencies and the tertiary education sector	To set outcome-focused objectives to be achieved within specific psychology qualifications.
The Board	To set the benchmarks for Board-approved programs of study and internships (e.g. the 5+1 internship program). To inform the profession and public about what level of knowledge and skill is required for general registration as a psychologist in Australia. To refer to when evaluating a registrant whose level of competence to practice may pose a risk of harm to the public (e.g. based on a complaint or notification to the Board).
Psychologists	To help plan their annual continuing professional development (CPD) goals each year for renewal of their registration.
Public, clients, and consumers	To understand what level of service they can expect from a psychologist.

About the proposal: The big picture

4. Why are we updating the competencies?

We are updating the competencies for general registration to ensure they continue to be relevant and useful for practitioners, and are an effective regulatory tool to ensure safe and effective psychology practice.

The competencies have not been updated since the beginning of the [National Scheme](#) in 2010, so it is time to refresh them. By updating the core competencies for registration, we can ensure they are contemporary, and we can be confident that psychologists are properly trained and qualified to safely and effectively deliver services in our current context and into the future.

The proposed enhancements to Competencies 3, 7 and 8 will support the development of a culturally safe psychology workforce and assist psychologists to practice professionally and safely in a sustainable way.

5. What are the main changes that we are proposing?

We have carefully reviewed the current competencies and are proposing the following improvements:

- **Updating** the eight core competencies to ensure they continue to be relevant, contemporary, and are aligned with the current Australian accreditation standards and international best practice.
- Listing all the competencies in **one document** (they are currently listed in several documents). This will improve understanding about the knowledge and skills expected of a psychologist and will make it easier for psychologists to develop their annual CPD learning plan.
- Placing a greater emphasis on **professional reflexivity, deliberate practice and self-care** in the competency document (new **Competency 3**), to assist practitioners to practice professionally and safely in a sustainable way.
- **Enhancing Competency 7** to emphasize culturally safe care with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families and communities in line with the commitment made by the National Scheme and Board to achieve equity in health outcomes between First Nations Peoples and other Australians.
- **Enhancing Competency 8** to better address the diversity in the Australian community, and in turn to require psychologists to work with sensitivity and respect with the diversity of clients, colleagues and others they are likely to encounter in their day-to-day work. The current *working across the lifespan* competency has been included in C8.
- Introducing the term **threshold professional competency** to better describe the minimum competency necessary to practice safely and effectively. We are not introducing a higher threshold, just better defining our competency expectations.
- Improving how we write the competencies at a **high level** to provide increased clarity and direction for practitioners. High level competencies describe foundational (core) competencies and must provide both succinct and sufficient information. We have improved the competency descriptions to clearly describe the requirement, but to also allow the flexibility for the competencies to be applicable to the many different contexts where psychologists work.
- Being clearer about taking a **holistic approach**. This means that even though the eight core competencies are grouped thematically, they do not stand alone but are interconnected and overlap. Practicing holistically is important for safe and effective care.
- Updating the way we write the competencies to reflect contemporary best-practice for describing competencies.

6. Will there be a transition time?

Yes. The *Professional competencies for psychologists* will be published on our website at least 12 months before they come into effect.

This transition will support the **current workforce** by giving psychologists time to complete a self assessment against the updated competencies and to plan any CPD that is needed relevant to their professional role and context of work (i.e. scope of practice).

The transition will also support the **future workforce** by providing the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) time to work with higher education providers to incorporate the updated competencies into their unit outlines and align expectations for graduate outcomes.

Since the updated competencies improve on the current competencies that have been in use since 2010, psychologists will not be starting from a basis of 'no competence'. The updated competencies enhance the current requirements and provide additional clarity and specificity about what is expected. The purpose of the transition period is for psychologists and other stakeholders to become familiar with these improvements.

How will the changes affect me?

7. I currently hold provisional registration, what will the updated competencies mean for me?

What you need to do will depend on where you are up to in your training when the updated general registration competencies come into effect, and whether your training was based on the current or the updated competencies.

Stage in Your training	Timing of application for general registration	What you will need to do
You have been assessed against the current competencies in your qualification, supervised practice/internship, and/or national psychology exam (if required).	You apply <u>before</u> the updated competencies come into effect.	Complete the application for general registration (AGEN-76 form) as per the usual process via the online application portal . Since you will hold general registration when the new competencies come into effect, see Question 8: <i>I currently hold general registration, what will the updated competencies mean for me?</i>
	You apply <u>after</u> the updated competencies come into effect.	You will need to work closely with your supervisor to ensure you meet all eight updated competencies before you apply for general registration . This means that you will need to do a self assessment against the <i>Professional competencies for psychologists</i> and undertake relevant Professional Development to ensure you meet the new competencies.
You have been assessed against the updated competencies in your qualification, supervised practice/ internship, and national psychology exam (if required).	You apply <u>after</u> the updated competencies come into effect.	You meet the updated competencies and no further action is required before you apply for general registration.
You have been assessed against a mixture of both the current competencies and the updated competencies in your qualification, supervised practice/ internship, and national psychology exam (if required). Note: The national psychology exam will be based on the updated competencies after the <i>Professional competencies for psychologists</i> come into effect.	You apply <u>before</u> the updated competencies come into effect.	Complete the application for general registration (AGEN-76 form) as per the usual process via the online application portal . Since you will hold general registration when the new competencies come into effect, see Question #8: <i>I currently hold general registration, what will the updated competencies mean for me?</i>
	You apply <u>after</u> the updated competencies come into effect.	You will need to work closely with your supervisor to ensure you meet all eight updated competencies before you apply for general registration . This means that you will need to do a self assessment against the <i>Professional competencies for psychologists</i> and undertake relevant Professional Development to ensure you meet the new competencies.

8. I currently hold general registration, what will the updated competencies mean for me?

Updated general registration competencies **will not affect your general registration as a psychologist**. Practitioners who currently hold general registration will remain registered when the updated competencies come into effect.

Psychologists will need to become familiar with the *Professional competencies for psychologists* including the enhancements to:

C3: Exercises professional reflexivity, deliberate practice and self-care.

C7: Demonstrates a health equity and human rights approach when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families and communities.

C8: Demonstrates a health equity and human rights approach when working with people from diverse groups.

Instead of self-assessing against the current competencies when developing your [Continuing Professional Development](#) (CPD) learning plan each year, you will self-assess against the updated competencies.

Any CPD to meet, refresh, extend or improve your knowledge and skills can be undertaken as part of the 30 hours of CPD that all psychologists complete each year to maintain registration. CPD includes a variety of learning modes such as: reading, workshops, seminars, conferences, professional podcasts or DVDs, active CPD, master classes, supervision, and reflective and reflexive professional practice.

You are already familiar with the CPD requirements and how to engage in supervision and learning to ensure you are a safe and effective practitioner. You can apply these same learning processes to ensure you meet the updated competencies.

9. I have obtained my psychology qualification overseas, and plan to apply for registration in Australia. What will the updated competencies mean for me?

The updated competencies for general registration will not result in any changes to the application timeframes, application process, or the requirement to complete the [transitional program](#).

If you apply for general registration after the updated competencies come into effect, the transitional program must include assessment of competence against the updated competencies as shown in the table below. The national psychology exam will be based on the updated competencies after the *Professional competencies for psychologists* come into effect.

Current competencies	Updated competencies
Competency 2: Ethical, legal and professional matters	Competency 2: Practises ethically and professionally Competency 3: Exercises professional reflexivity, deliberate practice and self-care.
Competency 7: Working with people from diverse groups	Competency 7: Demonstrates a health equity and human rights approach when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families and communities Competency 8: Demonstrates sensitivity, respect and cultural responsiveness when working with people from diverse groups

10. What should higher education providers know about updated general registration competencies?

Higher education providers (HEPs), accredited training providers, academics and lecturers will need to become familiar with the *Professional competencies for psychologists* including the enhancements to Competencies 3, 7 and 8.

The Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) updated their [accreditation standards](#) in 2019, and many of the proposed improvements to the Board's general registration competencies are already incorporated into the graduate competencies.

APAC will continue to work with HEP's to ensure the Board's competencies and the graduate competencies align. While higher degree students will have to meet all the competencies for registration by the end of their sixth year of training, those undertaking the professional masters will need to achieve some of the competencies at the fifth year, with the remaining being demonstrated by the end of their one-year internship.

It is anticipated that enhancements to units of study to include the updated competencies will be primarily subsumed within the usual quality assurance processes HEPs and accredited training providers undertake when revising course content, and will be assessed via the usual APAC course re-accreditation processes.

11. What should employers know about updated general registration competencies?

Employers who use the general registration competencies to inform their selection processes (e.g. key selection criteria), role descriptions and performance management processes will need to become familiar with the *Professional competencies for psychologists* including the enhancements to Competencies 3, 7 and 8, and update their relevant documentation.

Employers and organisations who offer CPD opportunities to their staff may wish to focus any upcoming CPD opportunities on the three competencies that have undergone the most change (C3, C7 and C8), to assist their staff to transition to the updated competencies.

12. What should supervisors know about the updated general registration competencies?

Supervisors will need to:

- 1) **Become familiar with the *Professional competencies for psychologists*** including the enhancements to Competencies 3, 7 and 8.
- 2) **Complete your own self-assessment** against the updated competencies and engage in CPD in any areas where you find gaps that are relevant to your scope of practice and supervisory role.
- 3) **Assist your supervisees to self-assess** against the updated competencies and to develop an outcome-focused learning plan for achieving any learning goals.
- 4) **Assess supervisees against the updated competencies** when they are published when providing supervision for training purposes (e.g. practicum, internships). There is no change to the processes you use to assess supervisee knowledge, skills and abilities. You will continue to use your current assessment methods (e.g. direct observation, reflective practice, review of practice documents, periodic review and feedback of competence).

Supervisors who hold Board-approved supervisor status (BAS) can continue to supervise interns and registrars throughout the transition to the updated competencies. We expect you will continue to supervise within your scope of practice and within your limits of competence and refer supervisees to other professional supports for advice where appropriate.

13. What do updated competencies mean for clients of psychologists?

Public safety is at the heart of the [National Scheme](#). The public can be confident their psychologist is suitably trained and qualified to practice in a competent and ethical manner.

It is expected that improving the competencies for general registration will have a positive impact on client and consumer health and safety. The updated competencies emphasize the importance of client-centred care and actively working towards providing positive health and mental health outcomes for people with diverse individual and cultural backgrounds, including priority groups within the community. It is expected that the updated competencies will have a positive impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and consumer health and safety by encouraging culturally safe and respectful practice.

We are also improving understanding about the knowledge and skills expected of a registered psychologist by placing all the competencies for general psychologists in one document – the *Professional competencies for psychologists*, rather than in several documents as they are now.

About the proposal: The details

14. What is the difference between scope of practice and threshold professional competency?

Scope of practice refers to the professional role and services that an individual registered practitioner is educated, trained and competent to perform. It refers to the role (e.g. therapist), context of work (e.g. private practice), or areas of psychology (e.g. mental health) in which a psychologist can demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and experience to practise safely and effectively in a way that meets our standards and does not pose any danger to the public or to themselves.

Scope of practice for the *psychology profession* is defined by the general registration competencies. These competencies distinguish a psychologist from other professions, for example occupational therapy, medicine, and pharmacy. The competencies describe the knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours, values and other attributes that enable a person to engage in safe and effective practice as a psychologist in Australia.

An **individual's scope of practice** evolves over time and can change depending on vocational choices and career path. As experience develops and the nature of a psychologist's work role changes, the psychologist may become more focused and narrowed in their individual scope of practice than a newly registered psychologist. This means that a psychologist may likely maintain a level of competency beyond the minimum professional competency threshold requirements within their scope of practice but may be unable to demonstrate they meet the breadth of *all* the general registration competencies as they apply to *all* contexts of psychological practice.

Psychologists should only practise in the areas where they have the knowledge, skills and experience to practise safely and effectively, and *not* practise in the areas where they are not proficient to do so, and where they may pose a danger to the public or themselves. This is to ensure the safety of the public, so consumers can have confidence in the psychology profession.

The term **threshold professional competency** describes the minimum professional competency necessary to practise safely and effectively as a registered psychologist in Australia.

Threshold professional competence must be demonstrated upon initial application to meet the general registration standard, and is considered to be met by completing a Board-approved qualification, undertaking any required supervised practice (e.g. practicum, internship) and passing the national psychology exam (if required).

Psychologists also need to maintain at least the threshold level of competency in all areas pertinent to their individual scope of practice throughout their career. Threshold professional competence is maintained by: completing the required [Continuing Professional Development](#) (CPD) each year, doing regular peer supervision, engaging in meaningful reflective and reflexive professional practice, and working as a psychologist (including meeting the [Recency of practice registration standard](#)).

If a psychologist fails to maintain at least the threshold level of professional competency in all areas relevant to their individual scope of practice, they could pose a risk to the public. By introducing the term threshold professional competency, we are being clearer about our expectations. We are not proposing a higher threshold than what currently exists.

15. Do I have to meet all of the competencies?

When the *Professional competencies for psychologists* come into effect, you will need to meet all eight general registration competencies when you **apply for registration** as a psychologist.

On **renewal of general registration** (30 November each year) you will need to meet all eight competencies as relevant to your individual scope of practice.

This requirement is already in place now with our current competencies and is achieved via the annual 30 hours of CPD. The only thing that is changing is the competencies are being updated.

Like the current competencies, the updated competencies have been written at a high level so they clearly describe the competencies, but allow the flexibility for psychologists (and their employers) to articulate and operationalise the competencies across the variety of practice contexts and settings where psychologists work.

Each of the eight core competencies in the *Professional competencies for psychologists* have a broad *competency title*, and several specific *competency descriptors*. **While not all descriptors will be relevant to every psychologist's work role, all eight competencies are relevant to every psychologist and every work context.** For example, a psychologist who works at a school will be very familiar with *Competency 4: Conducts psychological assessments* and may regularly use the WISC-V (relevant to descriptor 4.4). A psychologist who is a manager may not have given the WISC-V for many years as it is not in their scope of practice. However, descriptor 4.9 (*Identifies and manages inherent risks associated with assessments*) may be very important to their role as they ensure staff and supervisors who report to them have adequate processes, procedures and resources to conduct appropriate assessments safely and effectively with their clients.

In addition, **the same competency descriptor can be applied broadly to different work roles.** For example, Competency descriptor 5.4 "Outlines the risks and benefits of treatment" is relevant to psychologists providing direct care (e.g. informed consent for a specific intervention), to managers (e.g. developing safe operational procedures for an inpatient eating disorder clinic) and policy advisors (e.g. considering the direct effect that policy can have on treatment when developing updated competencies for psychologists).

16. What if I do a self-assessment and discover I don't meet the threshold?

If a psychologist fails to maintain at least the threshold level of professional competency in all areas relevant to their individual scope of practice, they could pose a risk to the public.

Psychologists are required to undertake a minimum of 30 hours of CPD each year. This is to ensure that you maintain your skills and do not fall below the threshold in the areas relevant to your individual scope of practice.

If you self-assess as below threshold professional competency in an area outside of your scope of practice, you do not pose a risk to the public because you are not working in this area. For example, if your knowledge and skills in treating children diagnosed with ADHD (C5.5 - Conducting culturally safe interventions) does not meet threshold, this should not pose a risk to the public if you don't work with children. Further, if your scope of practice is in providing treatment and assessments to clients in the aged care sector, you may self-assess as meeting threshold (or even excelling) in C5.5 with your elder adult client group and you are not at risk to the public because you are working within your scope of practice.

If, however, you self-assess as below threshold professional competence in an area that is essential for your job, you need to carefully review your practice to ensure it is safe. If you work in an organisation, we advise that you talk with your manager and/or supervisor about the appropriate steps to take. If you are in private practice, we advise that you talk with your supervisor and/or colleagues about the appropriate steps to take. You may need to refer a client to another psychologist with the relevant training and competency. You may need to restrict your job duties until you have undertaken sufficient training and supervision to practice safely and effectively.

If you are thinking about moving into a new work role or refreshing or expanding your scope of practice in your current job, then determine a learning plan for CPD and supervision to ensure you meet the minimum competency threshold to practice safely and effectively in that area.

17. Will the threshold for notifications change?

No. The proposal does not alter the criteria or process for how we [manage concerns](#) (complaints or notifications). It will remain the same as it is now. This means that we do not take regulatory action when a practitioner safely practices within their scope of practice and does not engage in behaviour that places the public at risk.

While some psychologists will already meet the minimum threshold for the updated competencies in their scope of practice, others may need to undertake some CPD to ensure that their knowledge and skills are current. We have proposed to publish the updated competencies at least 12 months before they come into effect. This aims to give psychologists time to complete a self assessment against the updated competencies and to plan any CPD or supervision relevant to their professional role and scope of practice that they identify is needed. We recommend you carefully self-assess against Competencies 3, 7 and 8, as these competencies have undergone the most change.

18. How are the eight competencies related to each other?

The eight core competencies are arranged thematically in the *Professional competencies for psychologists*.

The competencies do not stand alone, they are interconnected, overlap, and cannot be acquired or attained in a linear or isolated manner. They are designed to be used **holistically** as this reflects the nature of providing safe and effective psychological services. That is, a psychologist is expected to draw on and smoothly and effectively integrate all eight core competencies in their professional work.

19. Why is working across the lifespan no longer one of the eight core competencies?

The current Competency 8: *Working across the lifespan* is a standalone competency. The competency descriptor however states that it must be “demonstrated across competencies one to six”, with special mention of age in *Competency 7: Working with diverse groups*. This approach means that lifespan is both a standalone competency as well as being integrated into the other seven competencies.

To rectify this confusion, it is proposed the current *working across the lifespan* be removed as a standalone competency. Instead, we propose that *working across the lifespan* will remain integrated within all eight competencies. The terms ‘lifespan’ and ‘age’ are specifically mentioned in the updated Competencies 4, 5 and 8.

20. Why has the current Competency 7 been expanded into two competencies?

The current *Competency 7: Working with diverse groups* is truncated and does not provide enough information, guidance or clarity about our requirements.

This competency needs to be enhanced to provide alignment with international competency standards for working with individuals identifying with diverse social and cultural groups, and with improvements made to the graduate competencies for training Australian psychologists when the [APAC accreditation standards](#) were updated in 2019. Comparable international accreditation and regulation agencies have specific competencies for their First Nations Peoples, as well as providing explicit direction about the expectations for knowledge, skills and attributes required to practice safely and effectively with people from diverse groups.

The proposed Competency 7 focuses on providing culturally safe care with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, families and communities in line with our commitment to help [close the gap](#) by 2031.

The proposed Competency 8 has been updated to better address the various kinds of diversity in the Australian community, and in turn to require psychologists to work with sensitivity and respect with the diversity of clients, colleagues and others you are likely to encounter in your day-to-day work.

21. If I hold an AoPE do I also have to meet the general registration competencies?

Yes. Area of practice endorsement (AoPE) **is not** a registration category. It is a notation to be included on a psychologist’s record on the public [register of practitioners](#) to show that the psychologist has completed a Board-approved qualification and a period of supervised practice (registrar program) in an approved area of practice.

This means that psychologists who have an endorsement hold general registration. Graduates of a higher degree program must meet all eight general registration competencies when **applying for registration** as a psychologist. If you have successfully completed the [higher degree pathway](#) by graduating from an [approved program of study](#) in Australia, you will automatically meet the required competencies for registration.

On **renewal of general registration** (30 November each year) you will need to meet all eight general registration competencies as relevant to your individual scope of practice in addition to meeting the specific competencies relevant to your area of practice endorsement.

22. What is the relationship between the updated competencies and the code of ethics?

The Board uses several regulatory tools to protect the public and ensure that only those practitioners who are suitably trained and qualified to practise psychology in a competent and ethical manner are registered.

The regulatory tools we use includes [standards, codes, guidelines and policies](#) and includes both the competencies for general registration and the code of ethics.

We use the **competencies for general registration** to set the benchmarks for board-approved [programs of study](#) and internships (e.g. the 5+1 internship program), to inform the profession and public about what level of knowledge and skill is required for initial registration as a psychologist in Australia, and to refer to when evaluating a registrant whose level of competence to practice may pose a risk of harm to the public (e.g. based on a complaint or notification to the Board).

We use the **code of ethics** to specify the minimum standards of professional conduct expected from provisional psychologists and psychologists to ensure safe and effective professional practice, to set clear standards of professionalism for practitioners, to help the public understand what behaviour they can expect from a psychologist and assess whether their psychological service meets professional standards, and to refer to when taking regulatory action as a result of a notification.

We use both documents together to regulate the psychology profession to ensure that psychologists practice safely, and do not pose a risk to the public.