

Stakeholders' perceptions of the Occupational English Test

Occupational English Test

Australia



In November 2013 we completed research into the Occupational English Test (OET), which provided useful insights into the appropriateness of the test for professionals working in the healthcare sector, primarily in Australia and New Zealand but with growing recognition outside those markets.

OET from Cambridge Boxhill Language Assessment (CBLA is the joint venture for this product), is used to assess the English language competence of healthcare professionals who have gained their training and qualifications outside an English-speaking country, and who now want to work in an English-speaking environment. OET is relevant to 12 specific healthcare disciplines, including dentistry, medicine, pharmacy and nursing.

Currently, the majority of OET candidates want to work in Australia where OET has high recognition for student visas and professional registration.

This study considered the intended impact of OET when used to assess the language ability of healthcare professionals, and the test's appropriateness for the sector in terms of content, format and skills assessed. The study also considered the extent to which OET test

takers were perceived as 'workplace ready' in terms of their linguistic ability and confidence.

Qualitative and quantitative research data was gathered through interviews with Australian healthcare regulatory bodies, and surveys with stakeholders including OET test takers and teachers (based mainly in Australia and New Zealand), and Australian healthcare professionals – primarily medical doctors but also pharmacists. As expected, results showed that the majority of test takers use OET to support an application for professional registration in an English-speaking country, with a minority using OET for university admissions or immigration purposes. Most test takers reported an improvement in their use of English in a health-related context as a result of preparing for OET (with around 30% reporting a significant improvement), and a marked increase in confidence was also noted. The test was considered highly relevant to the healthcare sector in terms of topics, language and tasks, which also made OET itself a more engaging experience.

OET test takers were perceived as effective communicators within the healthcare context, in both technical and emotional language, and were also able to communicate with patients using lay terms. However, the research also showed that test takers wanted to become more familiar with Australian slang, cultural peculiarities and accents, as they felt these were important to their linguistic performance.

The test was considered highly relevant to the healthcare sector in terms of topics, language and tasks, which also made OET itself a more engaging experience.