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Impact by design: The role of the Occupational English Test in ensuring fitness to practice in the healthcare workplace

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There is concern that international medical graduates may not be ready for the workplace in terms of their English language proficiency, which may pose a risk to patient safety. Therefore, a test of English for the medical field/healthcare context has a significant role in ensuring that candidates for professional registration in the UK meet the requirements of the workplace and of professional regulatory bodies.

We report on 2013 research on the Occupational English Test (OET), a test of English for healthcare professionals, with different test versions tailored to 12 professions (medicine, nursing, pharmacy, etc.). The test was developed after extensive needs-analysis research, which included consultation with expert informants specialising in 12 healthcare professions and direct observation of their workplace activities in order to ensure the relevance of OET to specific healthcare contexts in terms of content, language, task format, and skills. As such, the test is based on the concept of impact by design – ensuring, from the outset, that assessment is designed with a potential to achieve positive impacts on test users and society more broadly (Saville 2012). The test is recognised by 30 regulatory healthcare bodies internationally.

The goals of the 2013 study were to investigate the perspectives of healthcare professionals on the impact and relevance of OET and preparation for OET, and also on its efficacy as an indicator of workplace readiness in terms of language ability.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, and analysed and discussed within a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design. As part of this design, the qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed separately, after which the results were merged to produce a well-rounded understanding of the findings. This approach enabled building a rich picture, and the triangulation of information from multiple sources enhanced confidence in the findings. Over 650 medical professionals participated in the study: past OET test-takers, their colleagues and supervisors, and representatives of healthcare boards.

The findings show that OET has a positive impact on OET test-takers' language ability and confidence in using English in their workplace. OET is perceived as an appropriate test for healthcare professionals by incorporating relevant language and content, and by simulating real-world tasks and requiring the language skills necessary for the healthcare workplace. OET test-takers are perceived to be capable and effective users of English, who communicate well with patients and colleagues on technical and patient-centred matters and who can use lay language so that patients can easily understand what they are saying. The key conclusion is that OET can be deemed to have a beneficial impact on the workplace because it prepares test takers for performing language-mediated tasks in their chosen profession and differentiates well between those who are and are not able to communicate effectively in English in the healthcare workplace.