

HODSPA response to the PBA communiqué on guidelines for the National
Psychology Examination.

The PBA proposal was given consideration at the HODSPA meeting in Perth (6th May 2011). Unfortunately the need for a response by 13th May left insufficient time for assessment of the detail in the communiqué, consequently the following points are of a general nature.

1.

In considering exemptions from the examination:- it seems odd to accredit Masters and other higher degree qualifications through a rigorous accreditation process and then ignore these processes and require trainees also to pass a National Examination. We strongly recommend that the PBA exempt from the National Examination, those candidates who successfully complete an appropriate accredited Masters or Higher degree qualification.

2.

The communiqué admits to the bias of the proposed curriculum in favour of counselling and mental health. This bias brings into question the appropriateness of the curriculum for some areas of professional work. For example, psychologists working in industrial and organisational settings may have little need of detailed knowledge of psychopharmacology, drug classification and pharmacokinetics.

Indeed, consideration of the proposed curriculum raises a number of questions. Assuming that the intention of the examination is to assess knowledge and competencies appropriate for professional work, and also assuming that the main targets for the examination are those trainee psychologists undertaking the 4+2 pathway, then the questions raised are: firstly, does the proposed curriculum reflect appropriate “basic “ knowledge?; secondly, should the examination aim to be a “one size fits all”?; and, thirdly, should the examination target knowledge rather than competencies? For the first question, if the main targets of the examination have already successfully graduated with an accredited 4-year degree then what requires examination is

the knowledge gained during the trainees' 2 years of supervised experience. The knowledge base that needs to be identified is not "basic", rather, it is advanced and targeted to work needs. Moreover, it is highly variable and depends on the type of work undertaken. This raises the second question, should the examination attempt to shoehorn highly variable knowledge and experience into one examination or should the process accept the different needs of different types of work and generate a number of differently targeted examinations? Finally, if the motivation of the examination is to ensure competence of psychologists who provide a professional service to the public, would it not be more valid and appropriate to evaluate competencies rather than knowledge. This is not a simple undertaking, but there are precedents for such assessments, such as the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) used in medical disciplines. HODSPA would be very willing to liaise with the PBA in order to facilitate the development of such an assessment protocol (or protocols) for psychology professionals.

3.

Assuming, the motivation for the National Examination is the desire of the Board to maintain quality assurance of trainees adopting the 4+2 pathway, then this proposal deserves support. However, little is said about the 5+1 pathway. Is it the Boards intention to insist on examining 5+1 candidates? If so, the 5th year effectively becomes a non-award qualification, where the education provider is required to teach to the National Examination curriculum. This may be a possible future scenario for education providers, but the implications on staffing and resources of providing this training in financially squeezed Psychology Departments requires careful consideration. HODSPA, as the representative of the major education providers, would appreciate further discussion on this issue.

4.

The adoption of a National curriculum may also have longer term unwanted consequences. Students at the undergraduate level may pressure Departments and Schools to adopt and follow a curriculum based on the National Examination – they will see their careers as depending on that. But

this will happen at the expense of the teaching of non-professional areas of psychology. This has the potential to limit teaching and research in non-professional areas of the discipline. This is a possible development that HODSPA would resist.

HODSPA anticipates providing further comment as the plans for a National Examination progress.

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