



**Investigating the test impact of the OET:
A qualitative study of stakeholder perceptions
of test relevance and efficacy**

Executive Summary

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Current conceptualisations of test validity have led to increased attention to the social context in which tests are implemented, to the values underpinning test constructs and to how test scores are interpreted, used and perceived by different stakeholders (McNamara & Roever, 2006). Fulcher and Davidson (2007) argue for an effect-driven approach to test development whereby impact on stakeholders not only informs design decisions but is the basis for ongoing monitoring of test validity. This study investigated the effects of the Occupational English Test (OET), a test which assesses the English proficiency of overseas-qualified health professionals who wish to practise in English-speaking healthcare contexts, by focusing on the test's impact on test stakeholders. Taking an effect-driven approach to test validity, the study is aimed at ensuring that the test functions well as a gateway to professional communication by exploring the test experience in relation to the communication demands of the workplace. The test experience is conceived of broadly as the test itself as well as the test preparation process and the effects of these on communication in the workplace. A range of stakeholders were interviewed to capture multiple perspectives on the impact and relevance of the OET test experience as well as perceptions of its efficacy as a predictor of successful healthcare communication. The stakeholder groups comprised past candidates (practising doctors and nurses who have taken the test), senior doctors and nurses who manage EAL (English as an Additional Language) staff and professional medical and nursing/midwifery board representatives. The stakeholders consulted worked in rural, regional and metropolitan contexts and there were representatives from hospitals and aged-care residences.

All interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically by two coders using NVivo software. The findings are reported in key themes from the interviews. The data analysis revealed an overall strong congruence between the test experience and actual communication in the workplace as perceived by key test stakeholder groups. For each sub-test, stakeholders generally considered the individual tasks to be relevant and useful. Past candidates indicated that they had selected OET over IELTS (International English Language Testing System) on the basis of the OET's professional relevance, and there was a strong perception among past candidates that the test experience had a constructive impact on their preparation – relating to a broad acculturation to expectations in healthcare practice as well as specifically to language – for the workplace. The stakeholder observations provide a very complex picture of communication in various workplaces. While the test format is abstracted to four broad skills, each with some overlap, in practice there is a complex inter-relationship among reading, writing, speaking and listening in the workplace with a strong interprofessional and collaborative component to particular activities. Although this does not invalidate the current test tasks, it indicates that there are some further qualities of workplace communication which may potentially be reflected in the test. These include incorporating interprofessional communication, non-verbal communication and management of the interaction in the speaking test, reconsidering the prioritisation of the writing test criteria and reviewing the writing task for nurses. Despite the increasing digitisation of systems supporting healthcare provision in the Australian context, the current mode of test delivery remains acceptable due to the widespread ongoing use of hand-written documents in healthcare workplaces.