How policy makers view language tests for professional registration

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Test use

Language tests as
• social sorting mechanisms, policy mandates
• articulating “objective” standards

Need to monitor
1. fair use of tests in policy
2. positive test impact in workplace

'No checks' on more than 80% of EU doctors working in NHS
Fewer than one in four EU doctors had their clinical competence in language skills checked, NHS figures show

James Meikle
The Guardian, Wednesday 23 October 2010

NHS staff's poor English is 'potential danger to patients'

By Adrian Goldberg
Presenter, 5 live Investigates

[15 Sep 2012]
Test use

*TOEFL* and *IELTS* designed for international students joining English-medium universities

Now also used in other contexts: migration, employment

Standards are “ambitious for wider and wider acceptance” – need to be vigilant that they are not the wrong standards (Davies, 2008)
Test mandate discourse

Study 1
Document analysis of consultation discourse in the UK and Australia about professional registration of doctors trained outside these jurisdictions
Research question
How are the test constructs perceived and/or represented by policy makers?

Data analysis
Study 1: document analysis
Study 1: Consultations

Test is evidence of establishing control

The Department of Health is firmly committed to preventing doctors who do not have sufficient knowledge of English from working in the UK. (DoH call, p. 5)

In May 2010, the Coalition Agreement set out that ‘we will seek to stop foreign healthcare professionals working in the NHS unless they have passed robust language and competence tests’ in order to assure patient safety and quality of care in the UK. (DoH call, p. 6)
Study 1: Consultations

*Priority is technical detail and implementation issues*

Specific feedback sought on currency of test results, results from more than one sitting *(AHPRA)*

Test scores have inherent meaning; a particular test is assumed by default

*There were various views about the overall score and the minimum score for each component, with proposals for a minimum overall score ranging from $6$ to $7.5$.* *(AHPRA report, p. 11)*
Study 1: Consultations

Respondents broaden the discussion

Report’s first quotation from a respondent:

*It goes without saying that clinical information and advice must be communicated clearly and accurately to patients, other healthcare professionals and carers so that patient safety and high quality care can be assured. From a patient perspective, communication is key to building trust in the patient-practitioner relationship* (DoH report, p. 12)
Study 1: Consultations

Respondents broaden the discussion

We will give full consideration to accepting any suitable alternatives to IELTS as soon as we are confident that these methods provide the necessary assurance of a doctor’s English language capability. (GMC report, p. 34)

Six submissions indicated that English language skills are not evidence of communication ability. Several of these questioned whether the standard is intended to be an English language test or a communication test. (AHPRA report, p. 13)
Discussion

Test construct is generally not a feature of policy-related discourse

Standard is naturalised, trusted – maintaining the standard ensures good functioning of the workforce and public safety

Scores may be set rather arbitrarily

Awareness of need to engage with test construct in some contexts of use
Conclusions

- Language testing is often out-sourced
- Tests users rarely consider test construct
- Engaging with construct is difficult

**TEST MANDATE**
- Public notions of test’s role

**TEST(S)**
- Describing
- Monitoring
- Controlling
- Specific collection of items/tasks
References


Documents


Downloaded from https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/ensuring-doctors-have-sufficient-english-language-capability

General Medical Council. (2013, September). Making sure all licensed doctors have the necessary knowledge of English to practise safely in the UK: A consultation. (26 pp.)
General Medical Council. [2014, January]. Consultation report: Making sure all licensed doctors have the necessary knowledge of English to practise safely in the UK. (43 pp.)