



THE IMPACT OF IELTS 7.0 ON INTERNATIONAL NURSING RECRUITMENT

Chris Moore, managing director of Specialist Language Courses, looks at how the Nursing and Midwifery Council's (NMC's) recent change to English language requirements for EEA-trained nurses has affected overseas recruitment.

The NMC changed its English language requirements for EEA-trained nurses in January 2016 to ensure 'safe and effective practice'. All new registrants now need to score 7.0 in the IELTS Academic English language test. While IELTS is unfamiliar to most healthcare professionals, many in the English Language Teaching industry felt this would significantly affect the ability of the UK health service to recruit nurses from Europe. A year later, these predictions appear to be coming true.

The IELTS test was developed in the 1980s for students who wish to study in English-speaking universities. The language covered includes academic articles, lectures, seminars and discursive essays. It does not test clinical language skills. A score of 7.0 is high. It is the level of English required by overseas students to study at Oxford or Harvard University.

To understand what this means in practice, most EU nurses start our IELTS preparation courses at around 5.0 and those from the Philippines and India between 6.0 and 6.5. There are considerable linguistic differences between scores, which widen at higher levels as the academic English required becomes more demanding. Most IELTS experts estimate it takes around 200 hours of study to advance from 4.0 to 5.0, but up to 300 hours to go from 6.0 to 7.0.

So, the bar is set high. But one can be reassured that newly-registered international nurses really have an excellent level of English. However, many argue this is the wrong kind of English and the level is so high that international recruitment is slowing

down at a time of shortages, as nurses need so much additional language training – also adding sizeable cost to recruitment bills.

As English language professionals working in healthcare, we wanted to find out more. We spoke to several senior workforce, education and organisation development professionals working in nine NHS trusts and one Welsh Health Board to get a sense of their understanding of the test and their insight on the impact the rule change is having on overseas recruitment.

Our findings were surprising. Firstly, we found that only one organisation had participated in the consultation on language requirements held by the NMC in summer 2015, though we then discovered that this is in line with the NMC consultation report, which stated that only 18 NHS employers and 11 independent sector employers or employment agencies contributed.

Secondly, we found that hardly anyone knew what the IELTS test consists of and how demanding level 7.0 is. We also found that no one knew of any alternatives to IELTS, even though other English tests with a clinical language focus are used to assess nurses working in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Singapore.

Thirdly, for those who recruit extensively from overseas, we discovered that the requirement is creating a significant bottleneck. Numbers of EEA-trained nurses have dropped significantly in the last six months, and in December only 101 nurses joined the NMC register, a year-on-year fall of 35.7% and the lowest monthly figure for 2016.

IELTS has also affected the recruitment of nurses from the Philippines and India, where English levels are relatively high. Some trusts told us that they had recruited large groups of nurses, but a year later under 10% had arrived, with nurses failing to score 7.0 multiple times.

In conclusion, it seems clear that NHS trusts did not know what they were getting when IELTS was introduced and one result is that recruiting internationally has become increasingly challenging, expensive and unpredictable. This is at a time when recruiting locally remains challenging, many older nurses are retiring and demand for healthcare is increasing.

Consequently, NHS trusts looking overseas need to get up to speed with the IELTS test so they understand the challenges they and their candidates face. This learning will be invaluable when managing the recruitment process – who to recruit, the timelines and costs involved, and the training that needs to be done. This will also enable trusts to engage effectively with the NMC when reviewing the language requirements to determine whether the current regime really is the best way of guaranteeing that international nurses' English ensures safe and effective practice.

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