

Heads of Departments and Schools of Psychology Association (HODSPA) Submission

There were 36,121 Registered Psychologists at 31 March 2023 and a further 8,187 provisionally registered psychologists were in various forms of training. Thus, we doubt that there is a shortfall of practicing psychologists and if there is, it will soon be offset by the full registration of the above trainees. We do accept that there are likely to be regional variations in the availability of psychologists and possible shortfalls in some of the specialties. In what follows, we present a set of proposals that would enable the retraining of current generally registered psychologists to be upskilled to gain endorsement in an Area of Practice and cover shortfalls in particular specialties.

There are two routes to registration as a psychologist. The first leads to General Registration. Trainees complete a one-year Master degree, the Master of Professional Psychology, including at least 300 hours of practicum and skills training, followed by the equivalent of a year of internship(s). The internship(s) include 1400 hours of supervised practice, 80 hours of supervision, and 60 hours of professional development. The graduate must then obtain at least 70% on the National Psychology Examination (administered by the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA)) in order to gain General Registration as a psychologist.

The second route is training in one of the nine Specialist Master programs (Educational and Developmental Psychology, Sport and Exercise Psychology, Counselling Psychology, Community Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Clinical Neuropsychology, Health Psychology, Organisational Psychology, and Forensic Psychology), which affords registration in an Area of Practice Endorsement (AoPE), takes two years (full time) and includes 1,000 hours of supervised practice. Graduates from one of the specialised areas of practice Master programs can apply for general registration upon completion of their program and do not take the National Psychology Examination. However, to gain endorsement in the area of practice associated with their completed Specialist Master program, they must complete an additional 3,000 hours in a Registrar program that is administered by the PsyBA.

However, if a practitioner with an AoPE in one specialty (e.g., Health Psychology) wants to add another AoPE (e.g., Clinical Psychology) to their qualifications in order to work as a clinical psychologist, they must complete a Bridging course of at least 12 months¹, encompassing 750 hours of supervised practice and 2,250 hours of a second Registrarship. Clearly, there is very little incentive for anyone to complete more than one AoPE.

At present, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is almost disregarded in the training of professional psychologists. This is despite the fact that Australia is almost unique in having nine specialised Areas of Practice. Clearly, there is some overlap between these professional programs, such that completion of one program (e.g., clinical neuropsychology), should offset some of the material associated with another program at the same level (e.g., clinical psychology). Other jurisdictions such as the UK, Europe, and North America do not even discriminate between these specialisations in their highly regarded competency-based training of professional psychologists. Given that this is the case, we recommend that:

A group be set up to look at the competencies associated with each of the AoPEs to determine where there is overlap, with a view to establishing a system of Recognition of Prior Learning to underpin a robust yet flexible approach to further training.

¹ This assumes that all Registered Psychologists have acquired the Generalist Competencies, which take 12 months. These 12 months are then subtracted from the 24 months of the Specialist Master program.

The same logic can be applied to the Supervised Placements. People completing one AoPE will undoubtedly gain some of the competencies associated with another AoPE. To that end, we propose that:

A set of objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) be developed to allow applicants to demonstrate their competencies, or lack thereof, in relation to the placements and clinical practice requirements associated with the various professional programs.

The lack of a coherent policy on RPL means that much of what already registered psychologists do on a daily basis is ignored should they seek to obtain or add an AoPE. Consider, it is unlikely that the clients seen by registered psychologists fit neatly into a category (e.g., clinical, forensic, developmental, etc.). Thus, all practicing psychologists will have gained valuable experience of dealing with a broad range of clients. None of this is considered when people apply for a Bridging program. Nevertheless, it is possible to assess this experience via the various forms of examination open to us (e.g., an OSCE) to determine whether an individual has acquired some, or perhaps all, of the competencies associated with the AoPE they wish to acquire.

Additionally, all registered psychologists are required to undertake substantial, regulated Continuing Professional Development to maintain their registration. This too could be a rich source of RPL. In an era of micro-credentialing, psychology could make greater use of the many excellent courses offered by various groups around the country. Thus, we recommend that:

Applicants be allowed to submit programs of Continued Professional Development as micro-credentials offsetting some of the formal training in professional Master and Bridging programs.

As noted above, when trainees have completed their specialist Master degree, they must then complete a Registrarship of 3,000 hours to obtain their AoPE. If they already have an AoPE, they must still complete another Registrarship of 2,250 hours!

The focus on hours is interesting, given that two recent reviews of accreditation (Snowball, 2014; Wood, 2019) argued against the use of time as a marker for accreditation and for the acquisition of competencies, which could take varying amounts of time. Unless the PsyBA can provide telling reasons concerning the need for a second Registrar program, we recommend that those who already have an AoPE be exempt from a second Registrarship and further, that those who have not yet acquired an AoPE be allowed to apply for RPL against the length of the Registrarship. Thus, we propose that:

First, the competencies associated with the Registrarship be set out so that applicants can apply for RPL towards the hours of practice required of a Registrarship. Second, that these competencies be assessed by OSCEs so that applicants can reduce the length of the Registrarship by demonstrating that they are already competent.

The above will allow us to graduate many more competent psychologists each year, while saving trainees from repeating what they already know and do. It would also provide a more robust and timely system for assessing the competencies of overseas applicants.