

NATIONAL LICENSING EXAMINATION: ARE WE READY FOR IT?

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Medical education in Pakistan has experienced a major change with the implementation of the Pakistan Medical Commission Act, 2020 in September 2020. One of the key features of the Act is the introduction of a uniform National Licensing Exam (NLE). It is two-steps (theory and skills) exit exam for graduates of medical and dental colleges who aspire to work in Pakistan. Passing the NLE will grant them a full license to practice. This is a shift from the previous practice where the full license was granted after successful completion of the house job only.

The concept of a uniform licensing examination for practice is not new. One of the leading examples is United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE), and similar examples can be quoted from around the world. There has been a significant increase in the number of colleges in Pakistan, with 73 medical and 42 dental colleges in the private sector compared to 45 and 17 colleges, respectively, in the public sector.¹ Concerns have been raised about the admission process and the standards of education and assessment of private colleges.² The NLE is seen as an assessment tool that will bring uniformity among graduates of public and private colleges. But it received an unwelcomed response from students in the form of demonstrations and social media uproar. Besides students, it will also have considerable implications for medical educators and medical colleges.

Advocates of NLE believe a uniform assessment will have a positive impact on the quality of medical education and healthcare services in Pakistan. Only those who demonstrate a minimum level of knowledge and skills will be allowed to enter practice.

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This will improve the standing of Pakistani graduates across the globe and will make sure only competent and safe doctors serve the patients. Pakistan Medical Commission may use the data obtained from NLE to identify underperforming colleges and help them improve their teaching and assessment strategies. It is also believed that a uniform licensing examination will improve public trust in our medical education and healthcare system. A public poll conducted by the General Medical Council found two-thirds of respondents were in favor of a single assessment strategy for having confidence in recently graduated doctors.³

Students have resisted NLE from the outset, on the legal front as well as on roads. They believe NLE shall be put into effect for students enrolled after the promulgation of the Pakistan Medical Commission Act, 2020. Those already enrolled shall be exempted from NLE. Moreover, students already take up to five professional university examinations before the house job, so subjecting them to NLE is to undermine and question the quality of assessment by medical universities. The students, and perhaps the educators too, will lose focus of competencies important for real-life practice, and would instead stress on the areas which are supposed to be tested in NLE. The licentiate exam will also act as a source of psychological, physical, and financial stress for the students.

The notion that NLE will ensure only competent doctors will enter practice is unfounded. McGaghie and colleagues found that scores in USMLE do not correlate with the acquisition of clinical skills among students.⁴ Moreover, some competencies like professionalism and ethics cannot be assessed by licentiate examinations, and medical educators believe examinations are limited in their ability to truly test the attributes needed to become a competent doctor.⁵ The concept that NLE will ensure patient safety is not supported by evidence. Only three out of over five thousand doctors in the United Kingdom, where a licensing examination is not implemented, caused any concern to patients because of their incompetence in their first year of practice.⁶ Papadakis et al. demonstrated that disciplinary action during clinical practice had a strong association with prior unprofessional behavior in medical school than with the performance

assessed in the national licensing examination.⁷ The data obtained by analyzing the results of NLE may help stratify colleges based on performance, but evidence does not support the idea that this alone will improve the standards of medical education.⁸ The demand put forward by students that NLE be applied to batches enrolled after September 2020 is rational. The United Kingdom and India are going to introduce exit exams for medical graduates but have deliberated the issue with stakeholders for more than 5 years instead of implementing it overnight.⁹ Entry into postgraduate training in Pakistan already requires taking the FCPS 1 examination and an additional screening exam by postgraduate training institutions putting students at risk of exam anxiety which is a well-recognized phenomenon.¹⁰

The significance of a common licensing exam cannot be undermined. But taking stakeholders on board, and timing and integrating different assessments are equally important. Certain changes will improve acceptance for NLE among students. Implementing it for the new batches with clear timelines and schedules well in advance of the assessment date will help resolve the unrest among students. Students shall be allowed to take the first step of NLE any time after passing the third professional examination and the skills part after graduation. This will provide flexibility, and students would find it relevant to the stage of their study and they will not lose focus during their house job. Meanwhile, the colleges will get time to reorganize their curricula to meet the needs of NLE. Moreover, efforts to integrate/substitute NLE with/for FCPS 1 examination or the additional screening exams conducted by postgraduate training institutions will decrease the burden on students. It will also result in objectivity and uniformity in the induction process for post-graduate training positions across the country.

Progress is impossible without change, and change begins at the end of the comfort zone. Implementation of NLE will certainly affect the morale of the students and house officers. It will take few years for the students to adjust to the needs of the new assessment. As teachers, we must be aware of this, and we shall make sure we are well equipped for this challenge to help our students get through the change.

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