

# English Language Competence Policy Guidance



19 August 2022



**Te Kaunihera Tapuhi o Aotearoa**  
Nursing Council of New Zealand

# Introduction

All internationally qualified nurses must demonstrate they meet minimum English language competence requirements before they can be registered. This guidance outlines the three pathways by which a nurse can show they meet this standard, and the evidence required of each pathway.

Please remember that English language competence is only one of the Nursing Council's criteria for registration. A nurse must meet all criteria before they can be registered.

## Why We Have an English Language Requirement

Effective communication, including comprehension, is a core part of being able to safely practise as a nurse. As the Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC) has told us:<sup>1</sup>

All people using health and disability services have the right to effective communication that enables them to understand the information provided. Communication features in around two-thirds of all complaints received by HDC, and a lack of understanding of the care provided can often be the driving force behind complaints. Language barriers are sometimes raised as a concern in complaints, and can have a disproportionate impact on disabled and older people.

Nurses need to be able to communicate effectively with patients and their whānau/ family, as well as each other and other members of a healthcare team. Communicating with other health professionals involves using and interpreting complex technical language and may occur in pressured, fast-paced environments. In some situations, miscommunication can lead to severe harm or death. This means that the Nursing Council has higher requirements for English competence than might be needed for immigration or study purposes.

The need for an English language standard is outlined in the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003, which is the Nursing Council's governing legislation. This requires the Council to be satisfied that a nurse can communicate at an appropriate level to practise in their scope (section 16(a)), and that their "ability to communicate and comprehend English is sufficient to protect the health and safety of the public" (section 16(b)). If we are not satisfied that this is the case, we cannot register the nurse.

## How Can I Demonstrate English Language Competence?

There are currently three evidence pathways for demonstrating English language competence. The Nursing Council regularly monitors and reviews these pathways to ensure they can give us confidence that a nurse's English competence is sufficient to ensure the health and safety of the public.

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1. Health and Disability Commissioner submission on *Proposed changes to the Internationally Qualified Nurse Competence assessment process and English language standard (2022)*.



The three evidence pathways are:

1. A *test-based evidence pathway*, in which the evidence of competence is based on results in a Council-approved English language test.
2. An *education-based evidence pathway*, in which the evidence of competence is based on proof that the education that led to registration as a nurse was taught and examined in English, in one of an approved group of countries.
3. A *registration-based evidence pathway*, in which the evidence of competence is based on proof that an English language test was passed to obtain registration in one of an approved small group of countries.

If you are eligible for pathways 2 and/or 3, you will be invited to apply for these pathways when your application is initially reviewed. You will always be eligible for the test-based evidence pathway, and in some situations this may be faster than an education-based or evidence-based pathway.

## Test-based Evidence Pathway

The most common and easiest way to demonstrate English competence is to provide evidence of having passed a Nursing Council-approved test at the required level.

Anyone is eligible for this pathway, regardless of where they were educated or are currently registered. The Nursing Council's approved English language tests for this purpose are the Occupational English Test (OET) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). These each test English across four bands: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

- For the OET, you must achieve a minimum score of 350 in reading, listening, and speaking. You must achieve a minimum score of 300 in writing.
- For the IELTS, you must sit the IELTS Academic and achieve a minimum score of 7 in reading, listening, and speaking. You must achieve a minimum score of 6.5 in writing.

The minimum scores in the English language tests can be achieved over more than one sitting of OET or IELTS. This is sometimes referred to as 'clubbing'. However, all required scores must be met within 12 months of first sitting the test, and all sittings must be completed within three years of commencing your application.

All results must be from one of the two approved tests. You cannot, for example, use OET results for reading and writing and IELTS results for listening and speaking.

## Acceptable Testing Modes

Tests must be conducted at an OET or IELTS testing centre, either on paper or on computer. The Nursing Council does not currently accept testing conducted completely online, such as OET@home. The only exception to this is the speaking component of the OET's 'on computer' venue-based option, which we accept as part of this testing mode.

## Education-based Evidence Pathway

If you have received your initial nursing education in some countries, we will accept that education as evidence your English language competence is sufficient to protect the health and safety of the public. These jurisdictions are as follows:

- Canada
- Ireland
- Singapore
- The United Kingdom
- The United States of America

These countries are all members of the International Nurse Regulator Collaborative (INRC), with similar education standards and curricula, and where English is the primary language of instruction and examination.

You must be able to demonstrate that the education you received was conducted in English. Please be aware that you may be required to provide evidence of this, and this might extend the time needed to assess your application.

Eligibility for this pathway is based on the education that led to your initial registration as a nurse. Postgraduate or post-experience education in one of the above countries does not make you eligible for this pathway.

### Registration-based Evidence Pathway

If you are currently registered in some jurisdictions and had to sit an English language test to gain that registration, we will accept that registration as evidence your English language competence is sufficient to protect the health and safety of the public. These jurisdictions are as follows:

- Canada
- Ireland
- The United Kingdom
- The United States of America

These countries are all members of the International Nurse Regulator Collaborative (INRC), where an English language test is normally required for an internationally qualified nurse to gain registration in these countries. We recognise that in some USA and Canadian states it is currently possible to gain registration without sitting an English language test. If this applies to you, you are not eligible for this pathway. This applies even if your registration is recognised in other states and territories where an English language test is required for registration. Similarly, if your registration in the United Kingdom did not require you to demonstrate English competence (e.g. due to European Union recognition arrangements) you are not eligible for this pathway.

This pathway is intended primarily for nurses who were not originally educated in one of the above countries. If you received your initial nursing education in one of these jurisdictions, we recommend that you apply under the Education-based Evidence Pathway rather than this pathway.

Please be aware that you may be required to provide evidence that you sat an English language test to gain registration. In some circumstances this may extend the time needed to assess your application.

## How do these pathways apply to Australian nurses?

Under the terms of the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Act 1997, if you are registered in Australia then you do not have to supply evidence of English language competence.



If you completed an initial nursing education programme in Australia (e.g. a Bachelor of Nursing) but have never been granted Australian registration, we recommend that you contact the Nursing Council to discuss your specific situation.

