

National Licensing Exam: Medical Students' Perspective

Tausief Fatima

IMPORTANCE Assessments play an important role in the process of learning and help in motivating learners. All assessments have different effects during the education process like decisions about grades, the effectiveness of curriculum, placement, instructional needs, advancement, and in some cases funding. Recently Pakistan Medical Commission has started National Licensing Examination (NLE) 2021 under PMC ACT. The PMC is struggling to achieve centralization and standardization of medical education with this exam. There are opposing arguments whether this exam would be able to achieve its objectives. Here, we present the student perspective in this short communication.

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Perspective

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Assessments play an important role in process of learning and help in motivating the learners. All assessments have different implications in the educational process like instructional needs, decisions about grades, the effectiveness of curriculum, placement, advancement, and in some cases funding¹. Licensing exams are high-stake exams in medicine to assure the quality of educational goals and learning objectives. In other words, they primarily aim at judging whether students are able to save another life or not. It's not only high-stake for the learner and administration but for the whole society. Medical students take countless high to mid-stakes exams during 5 years of MBBS. Recently Pakistan medical commission started conducting licensing examinations for the 1st time. The National Licensing Examination (NLE) 2021 has been designed under PMC ACT Section 20. It has been developed and will be administered to gauge the ability of MBBS graduates to practice independently². Passing the NLE (both the theory and clinical skills examination components) is mandatory for obtaining a full license to practice as General Practitioner. The PMC, however, is struggling to achieve centralization and standardization of medical education with this exam.

The major stakeholder in this stance is the medical student and the medical faculty. So, we conducted a survey to assess the perspective of two batches of final-year medical students (outgoing and new). The data regarding the perspective of MBBS students about NLE was collected through WhatsApp. The data was analyzed and is being reported below.

Students mentioned many discussions that have been done in connection with the NLE exam. The purpose of the NLE and final MBBS exam seems similar which is making sure the competencies of the graduating students as a general practitioners. The strongest argument in support of NLE is that it might solve the problems regarding the standardization of the final MBBS exam in medical education in Pakistan. It appears to be the right reason for giving a national-level exam, but this is the wrong way to achieve standardization. Why not make the already existing exam up to the standard? The number of exams given to assess the same objectives will not add to the quality of medical education and will not help in the standardization of this and for that matter any assessment.

Students mentioned many problems with the assessment system of the current medical education in Pakistan. One of these problems is that these exams are based on testing the knowledge component of the learners and these assessments do not assess the workplace-based competency of medical students but just a mere portion in form of "shows how". They mentioned a lack of real skill in teaching and assessment. According to them, NLE will not solve this problem either.

The faculty that constructs the MCQs for the final year MBBS exam is the faculty asked to construct MCQs papers for NLE with the same learning objectives. What difference will it create except to burden the already burdened undergraduates and the faculty? The medical education

system is already troubled from all sides. There is a need to devise policies to make the system better rather than increasing the number of exams but flouting the quality and purpose of the exams.

If we compare the NLE with international exams, it is correct that all developed countries have comparable exams. But the difference lies in the system. USMLE is embedded in the undergraduate program of medical education in the USA. USMLE Step 1 is taken halfway through medical school, then Step II is closer to the end of medical school, and Step III is before the end of their internship (house job) year. It is also worth mentioning that like the USMLE, the UK's licensing examination is introduced and undertaken as part of the medical school degree program. It is not a sequestered examination with an unknown layout and unprofessed outcomes, forced suddenly after graduation. This is what National Licensing Exam is!

The NLE will be conducted twice a year with unlimited attempts if failed by the student and each attempt will cost Rs. 12000/-. Will these six months not be a waste of energy and working hours for doctors and the administrative staff in a resource-depleted country? This is the time for them to work in the periphery, fill the empty seats of doctors, provide health care facilities to the neediest and prepare for further specialty in field of their choice. They will be deprived of practicing the knowledge and skill they achieved in 5 years. There is a need to give motivation to students for this assessment. Either link this to the exam which helps them to pursue the specialty training, or it can replace the final exam of MBBS/BDS.

Another issue that students highlighted about NLE is the sudden implementation of the exam. They claim that this

new PMC act cannot be applied to these students as it came into existence after their admission to medical colleges. When we compare this haste with international standards, we see that the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board test was suggested for the test in 2005 in the UK for the first time and it was officially announced in 2017 which is almost 6 years before the actual exam was conducted. It's quite contrary in Pakistan; the exam is announced and implemented in less than a year. Things done in haste and without taking stakeholders on board are the things that fared even worse.

These are some objections examined here raised by the students and all indicate that NLE is going to be a problem. We cannot stress more on standardization and centralization of assessment of medical trainees. But due to all the reasons mentioned above, it seems a struggle to do the right in a tiring and erroneous way. As a nation we need to meet the world standards, and to do so we need to systematize our medical education to come at par with the international community or Pakistani medical graduates will not be able to practice globally. We might lose the recognition of our medical degree internationally. This would be an alarming situation.

Before I deduce, it is worth mentioning that it is very discouraging for doctors and medical graduates to be treated so amateurishly. They are not only the country's most intelligent, ambitious professionals but also fight on the front line against all diseases. For them to not be heard and simply forced to abide by useless and poorly conceived laws is quite unacceptable.

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