
Hearing Aid Council and Health Professions Council consultation on standards of proficiency and the threshold level of qualification for entry to the Hearing Aid Audiologists/Dispensers part of the Register.

Introduction

Hearing Aid Dispensers are a health-care profession currently regulated by the Hearing Aid Council (HAC). The HAC was established by an Act of Parliament in 1968. It has a statutory duty to: set standards of education and training and of professional practice for dispensers; to maintain registers of dispensers and their employers; and investigate and take disciplinary action where dispensers and their employers fail to meet practice standards.

In 2005, the Government announced that the HAC was to be abolished and its registration and regulation functions transferred to the Health Professions Council (HPC). The Government has subsequently announced that this transfer will take place in March 2009.

The HPC is a health regulator and its role is to protect the health and wellbeing of people who use the services of the health professionals it registers.

To protect the public, the HPC sets standards that health professionals must meet. The HPC sets standards for health professionals' education and training, behaviour, professional skills and health. The HPC keeps a register of health professionals who meet its standards.

Health professionals on the HPC register are called 'registrants'. If registrants do not meet its standards, the HPC can take action against them which may include removing them from the Register so that they can no longer practise.

About the consultation

In preparation for the transfer, the HAC and the HPC are consulting on proposed profession-specific Standards of Proficiency and on the threshold level of qualification for entry to the Hearing Aid Audiologists part of the HPC Register.

The HAC and the HPC are consulting together in recognition of the role of each organisation as statutory regulators and the expertise of each organisation in developing standards.

It should be noted that although the legislative process to transfer the regulation of hearing aid audiologists has begun, the necessary legislation has yet to be passed.

However, the HAC and HPC believe that it is important to start this work at an early stage, to allow enough time to benefit from the input of stakeholders. In particular, this allows time for a full three-month public consultation period.

This document sets out the process of this consultation, the proposed draft standards and how consultation responses will be considered by the HAC and the HPC.

Current standards

Section 1 (3) of the Hearing Aid Council Act 1968 (as amended) says that the HAC must draw up Codes of Trade Practices for adoption by dispensers and their employers. This code sets out minimum standards of professional practice that all dispensers are expected to maintain. The Code has been revised and updated on a number of occasions since the HAC was established, with the last major review being conducted in 2004. Section 1(3) also requires the Council to draw up Standards of Competence: minimum education and training requirements for registration as a hearing aid dispenser. Such standards have been in place since 1970, and have included both a company-based training route and degree qualification route to the Register.

When the HAC is abolished and its functions are transferred to the HPC, the Code of Practice and the Standards of Competence will be repealed. They will be replaced by Standards of Proficiency and the threshold qualification point within the Standards of Education and Training. Dispensers will also be required to meet the HPC's Standards of

Conduct, Performance and Ethics; these are common to all professionals regulated by the HPC.

About the Standards of education and training

The HPC sets standards of education and training ('SETs'). These are standards that apply to education and training programmes which lead to eligibility to apply for registration. These standards will replace the HAC's Standards of Competence (2008) and clauses 25 to 30 of the Code of Practice (2008).

The HPC's Education - Approvals and Monitoring Department is responsible for conducting approval visits of education and training providers to ensure that their programmes meet the standards.

Programmes are assessed against the standards of education and training which cover such areas as admissions, assessment standards and practice placements. A programme which meets the standards of education and training will also allow a student who successfully completes that programme to meet the standards of proficiency.

Once a programme is approved, a graduate from that programme is eligible to apply for registration. Approval is granted on an open-ended basis, subject to ongoing checks via the monitoring and major change processes.

When a new profession is regulated, the education and training programmes which lead to existing registration would normally be approved. Arrangements would then be developed to visit or monitor programmes over a period of time to make sure that the standards are met.

SET 1: Threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register

Standard one of the standards of education and training ('SET 1') sets out the threshold level for entry to the Register in the existing regulated professions. This is articulated as a threshold academic level. Every time a new part of the HPC Register is opened, the threshold level of qualification for entry for the new profession needs to be determined following consultation and added to the standards.

The threshold level is set at the level necessary for people who successfully complete an education and training programme to meet all of the standards of proficiency.

In setting the threshold level of qualification for entry, the HPC is setting the threshold academic level of qualification which it would normally accept for the purposes of an approved programme which leads to registration. As the threshold is the 'minimum', programmes equivalent to or above the threshold academic level may be approved. Diplomas and Certificates of Higher Education, as well as B.Sc degrees, may be approved provided that someone graduating from that programme is capable of meeting the requirements set out in the Standards of Proficiency.

The threshold academic level of qualification for entry to the Register applies to pre-registration education and training programmes seeking approval rather than to individuals. Therefore, it would not affect individuals who might have followed education and training programmes delivered at levels below the threshold in the past. In particular, individuals who are deemed eligible to join the HAC's register or currently registered with the HAC will be able to register with the HPC (subject to their meeting the transfer and registration requirements).

Our proposal

The Hearing Aid Council currently approves ten degree programmes delivered at seven Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The academic awards of qualification vary from Foundation degree to Masters Degree level. Foundation degrees in hearing aid audiology have been developed by a number of HEIs, following proposals set out by the HAC in consultation in August 2006. The HAC proposed that the Foundation Degree would replace the company-based route as the minimum education requirement for registration as a dispenser. The company-based route was closed to new trainees from March 2008.

We therefore propose that the threshold level for entry to the Register for hearing aid audiologists should be set at a foundation degree. The wording in the standard one of the standards of education and training would read:

'Foundation degree in hearing aid audiology'

Consultation question: Do you agree that the threshold level of qualification for entry to the hearing aid audiologists part of the HPC Register should be set at a foundation degree?

About the standards of proficiency

- **Function**

Article 5(2)(a) of the Health Professions Order 2001 ('the order') says that HPC must:

'...establish the standards of proficiency necessary to be admitted to the different parts of the register being the standards it considers necessary for safe and effective practice under that part of the register'

This means that the HPC must publish standards for each of the professions that it regulates which are the 'necessary' or 'threshold' standards considered to be essential for safe and effective practice. The standards play a central role in how someone becomes registered and remains registered.

The HPC approves education and training programmes to make sure that they allow students to meet these standards when they graduate. The HPC also assesses applications from applicants who have trained outside of the UK against these standards. If an applicant meets these standards they are eligible to be registered.

If a registrant's competence is called into question the HPC will look at these standards in deciding whether it needs to take any action to protect members of the public.

Every time a professional registered with the HPC renews their registration, they are asked them to sign a declaration to confirm that they continue to meet the standards of proficiency which apply to them.

- **Structure**

The standards of proficiency are divided into generic standards which apply to all registrants registered with the HPC and profession-specific standards which apply only to that part of the Register.

We are seeking the view of stakeholders on the draft profession-specific standards of proficiency for hearing aid audiologists/dispensers in this document.

- **Standards of proficiency and scope of practice**

The HPC defines scope of practice as the area or areas of a registrant's profession in which they have the knowledge, skills and experience to practise lawfully, safely and effectively, in a way that meets the relevant standards and does not pose any danger to the public or to them.

A registrant's scope of practice may change over time and HPC recognises that the practice of experienced registrants often becomes more focused and specialised than that of newly registered colleagues. This might be because of specialisation in a certain clinical area or with a particular group, or a movement into roles in management, education or research.

A registrant's particular scope of practice may mean that they are unable to continue to demonstrate that they meet all of the standards of proficiency that apply for the whole of their profession. As long as they make sure that they are practising safely and effectively within their given scope of practice and do not practise in the areas where they are not proficient to do so, this will not be a problem.

Putting together the draft standards of proficiency

The draft standards set out in this document were developed by the STEP:UP Working Group. STEP:UP (which stands for Standards of Training, Education and Proficiency Update group) was established by the HAC in September 2006 and included representatives from professional bodies (British Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists, Association of Independent Hearing Healthcare Professionals and British Academy of Audiology), the HAC and the HPC, Royal National Institute for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People and Hearing Concern.

STEP:UP met on a number of occasions. The group began by setting out the typical clinical pathway for dispensing hearing aids and the clinical risks associated with each component of the clinical pathway. STEP:UP's main considerations in putting together the draft standards were to ensure that the standards were:

- set at the necessary threshold level for safe and effective practice;
- consistent with the standard content of pre-registration education and training; and
- written in clear language appropriate to their primary role in legislation.

The standards also need to conform to HPC's obligations as a qualifications body under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Our proposal

The draft Standards developed by STEP:UP and approved in principle by the HAC are set out below. Most of these standards are common to all professions regulated by the HPC. Those standards that are specific to Hearing Aid Audiologists/Dispensers are set out in italics.

Consultation questions: Do you think the standards are at a threshold level for safe and effective practice? Do you think any additional standards are necessary? Do you think there are any standards which should be reworded?

Proposed standards

Expectations of a health professional

1a: Professional autonomy and accountability

Registrant hearing aid audiologists must:

1a.1 be able to practise within the legal and ethical boundaries of their profession

- understand the need to act in the best interests of service users at all times
- understand what is required of them by the Health Professions Council
- understand the need to respect, and so far as possible uphold, the rights, dignity and autonomy of every service user, including their role in the diagnostic and therapeutic process and in maintaining health and wellbeing
- be aware of current UK legislation applicable to the work of their profession

1a.2 be able to practise in a non-discriminatory manner

1a.3 understand the importance of and be able to maintain confidentiality

1a.4 understand the importance of and be able to obtain informed consent

1a.5 be able to exercise a professional duty of care

1a.6 be able to practice as an autonomous professional, exercising their own professional judgement

- be able to assess a situation, determine the nature and severity of the problem and call upon the required knowledge and experience to deal with the problem

- be able to initiate resolution of problems and be able to exercise personal initiative
- know the limits of their practice and when to seek advice or refer to another professional
- recognise that they are personally responsible for and must be able to justify their decisions

1a.7 recognise the need for effective self-management of workload and be able to practise accordingly

1a.8 understand the obligation to maintain fitness to practise

- understand the need to practice safely and effectively within their scope of practice
- understand the need to maintain high standards of personal conduct
- understand the importance of maintaining their own health
- understand both the need to keep skills and knowledge up to date and the importance of career-long learning

1b: Professional relationships

Registrant hearing aid audiologists must:

1b.1 be able to work, where appropriate, in partnership with other professionals, support staff, service users and their relatives and carers

- understand the need to build and sustain professional relationships as both an independent practitioner and collaboratively as a member of a team
- understand the need to engage service users and carers in planning and evaluating diagnostics, treatments and interventions to meet their needs and goals
- be able to make appropriate referrals

1b.2 be able to contribute effectively to work undertaken as part of a multi-disciplinary team

1b.3 be able to demonstrate effective and appropriate skills in communicating information, advice, instruction and professional opinion to colleagues, service users, their relatives and carers

- be able to demonstrate effective and appropriate skills in communicating information, advice, instruction and professional opinion to colleagues, service users, their relatives and carers
- be able to communicate in English to the standard equivalent to level 7.0 of the International English Language Testing System, with no element below 6.5

- understand how communication skills affect the assessment of service users and how the means of communication should be modified to address and take account of factors such as age, physical ability and learning ability
- be able to select, move between and use appropriate forms of verbal and non-verbal communication with service users and others
- be aware of the characteristics and consequences of non-verbal communication and how this can be affected by culture, age, ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs and socio-economic status
- understand the need to provide service users (or people acting on their behalf) with the information necessary to enable them to make informed decisions
- understand the need to use an appropriate interpreter to assist service users whose first language is not English, wherever possible
- recognise that relationships with service users should be based on mutual respect and trust, and be able to maintain high standards of care even in situations of personal incompatibility
- *be able to identify anxiety and stress in patients, carers and others, and recognise the potential impact upon communication*
- *understand the difficulties in communication experienced by those with impaired hearing*
- *recognise the need to seek external assistance for those situations when communication is ineffective for whatever reason*

1b.4 understand the need for effective communication throughout the care of the service user

- recognise the need to use interpersonal skills to encourage the active participation of service users
- *recognise the need for and be able to apply the particular skills required to facilitate effective care for the appropriate age groups and those with impaired hearing*
- *understand the need to empower patients, clients and users to manage their aural health and related issues and recognise the need to provide advice on self treatment where appropriate*
- *be able effectively to communicate the financial consequences of the purchase of a hearing aid system*

The skills required for the application of practice

2a: Identification and assessment of health and social care needs

Registrant hearing aid audiologists must:

2a.1 be able to gather appropriate information

- *be able to undertake and record appropriate case histories*

2a.2 be able to use appropriate assessment techniques

- be able to undertake and record a thorough, sensitive and detailed assessment, using appropriate techniques and equipment

2a.3 be able to undertake or arrange clinical investigations as appropriate

2a.4 be able to analyse and critically evaluate the information being collected

- *be able to interpret the data arising from case history, physical examination and hearing assessments.*
- *be able to check that equipment is functioning accurately and within the specifications, and to take appropriate action in the case of faulty functioning and operation.*

2b: Formulation and delivery of plans and strategies for meeting health and social care needs

Registrant hearing aid audiologists must:

2b.1 be able to use research, reasoning and problem solving skills to determine appropriate actions

- recognise the value of research to the critical evaluation of practice
- be able to conduct evidence-based practice, evaluate practice systematically, and participate in audit procedures
- be aware of a range of research methodologies
- be able to demonstrate a logical and systematic approach to problem solving
- be able to evaluate research and other evidence to inform their own practice

2b.2 be able to draw on appropriate knowledge and skills in order to make professional judgements

- be able to change their practice as needed to take account of new developments
- be able to demonstrate a level of skill in the use of information technology appropriate to their practice

2b.3 be able to formulate specific and appropriate management plans including the setting of timescales

- understand the requirement to adapt practice to meet the needs of different client groups distinguished by, for example, physical, psychological, environmental, cultural or socio-economic factors
- *be able to formulate and provide appropriate advice regarding hearing aids and associated technologies and their use to facilitate informed choices by patients, clients or users*

2b.4 be able to conduct appropriate diagnostic or monitoring procedures, treatment, therapy or other actions safely and skillfully

- understand the need to maintain the safety of both patients, clients and users and those involved in their care
- *ensure that the environment in which patients, clients and users are seen is appropriate for the service, care and attention given*
- *be able safely to use such techniques and equipment to assess hearing loss*
- *be able to evaluate the most appropriate hearing aid system and/or associated technologies for patients, clients and users*
- *be able to plan, implement and manage appropriate rehabilitation programmes for patients, clients and users to optimise successful outcomes*
- *be able safely and competently to take impressions of the ear*
- *be able safely and competently fit hearing aids*

2b.5 be able to maintain records appropriately

- be able to keep accurate, legible records and recognise the need to handle these records and all other information in accordance with applicable legislation, protocols and guidelines
- understand the need to use only accepted terminology in making records

2c: Critical evaluation of the impact of, or response to, the registrant's actions

Registrant hearing aid audiologists must:

2c.1 be able to monitor and review the ongoing effectiveness of planned activity and modify it accordingly

- be able to gather information, including qualitative and quantitative data, that helps to evaluate the responses of service users to their care
- be able to evaluate intervention plans using recognised outcome measures and revise the plans as necessary in conjunction with the service user
- recognise the need to monitor and evaluate the quality of practice and the value of contributing to the generation of data for quality assurance and improvement programmes
- be able to make reasoned decisions to initiate, continue, modify or cease treatment or the use of techniques or procedures, and record the decisions and reasoning appropriately
- *be able to recognise those conditions or circumstances that require the involvement of other professionals and give the appropriate advice to patients, clients and users.*
- *be able to select the most appropriate hearing aids and/or associated technologies*

2c.2 be able to audit, reflect on and review practice

- understand the principles of quality control and quality assurance
- be aware of the role of audit and review in quality management, including quality control, quality assurance and the use of appropriate outcome measures
- be able to maintain an effective audit trail and work towards continual improvement
- participate in quality assurance programmes, where appropriate
- understand the value of reflection on practice and the need to record the outcome of such reflection
- recognise the value of case conferences and other methods of review
- *recognise the need to be aware of emerging technologies and new developments in hearing assistance*

Knowledge, understanding and skills

3a: Registrant hearing aid audiologists must:

3a.1 know and understand the key concepts of the bodies of knowledge which are relevant to their profession-specific practice

- understand the structure and function of the human body, relevant to their practice, together with knowledge of health, disease, disorder and dysfunction
- be aware of the principles and applications of scientific enquiry, including the evaluation of treatment efficacy and the research process
- recognise the role of other professions in health and social care
- understand the theoretical basis of, and the variety of approaches to, assessment and intervention

- *understand in the context of hearing aid audiology -*

- *the anatomy and physiology of the outer, middle, inner ear and central auditory pathways*
- *medical aspects of hearing loss*
- *psycho-acoustics*
- *acoustics, speech production and perception*
- *the measurement of hearing and of other auditory system functions*
- *hearing aid and associated technologies - selection, fitting, programming and evaluation.*

3a.2 know how professional principles are expressed and translated into action through a number of different approaches to practice, and how to select or modify approaches to meet the needs of an individual

3a.3 understand the need to establish and maintain a safe practice environment

- be aware of applicable health and safety legislation, and any relevant safety policies and procedures in force at the workplace, such as incident reporting, and be able to act in accordance with these
- be able to work safely, including being able to select appropriate hazard control and risk management, reduction or elimination techniques in a safe manner in accordance with health and safety legislation

- be able to select appropriate protective equipment and use it correctly
- be able to establish safe environments for practice, which minimise risks to service users, those treating them, and others, including the use of hazard control and particularly infection control

Your responses

We would welcome your response to this consultation in whatever format is convenient for you. However, you might wish to answer the questions below.

1. Do you think the standards are at a threshold level for safe and effective practice?
2. Do you think any additional standards are necessary?
3. Do you think there are any standards which should be reworded?
4. Do you agree that the threshold level of qualification for entry to the hearing aid audiologists part of the HPC Register should be set at a foundation degree?

This consultation will put the proposed standards before a wide range of stakeholders, including professional bodies, employers, higher education institutions and others with an interest in the standards.

The consultation will run for three months until **15th October 2008**. Further copies of this document will be available on the HAC and the HPC websites to download.

If you would like to respond to this consultation, please send your response to:

Hearing Aid Audiologists/Dispensers consultation
Policy and Standards Department
Health Professions Council
Park House
184 Kennington Park Road
London
SE11 4BU

Email: consultation@hpc-uk.org

Website: www.hpc-uk.org/aboutus/consultations

You will also be able to view the consultation on the HAC website but please send all responses to the HPC addresses above.

HAC website: www.thehearingaidcouncil.org.uk/about-the-council/policy-consultation

At the end of the consultation period, the HAC and the HPC will analyse the responses received. These responses will be considered by STEP:UP, which may recommend changes to the proposals for consideration by both the HAC and the HPC. A summary of the responses received and the decisions taken as a result will be published on the HAC and the HPC websites.

If you would prefer your response not to be made public, please indicate this when you respond.