



**Social Workers
Registration Board**
Kāhui Whakamana Tauwhiro

ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCE FOR OVERSEAS-QUALIFIED APPLICANTS FOR REGISTRATION

POLICY STATEMENT

Last Reviewed: February 2024; minor revision June 2024
For Review: February 2025

Introduction

1. English comprehension skills and the ability to speak and communicate effectively in English are essential for safe social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. This policy statement sets out the Social Workers Registration Board's (the Board) requirement for overseas-qualified applicants for registration to speak and write English reasonably effectively and understand spoken and written English reasonably well. This relates to s7(d) of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003.
2. Section 8D(b) allows the Board to require an examination or assessment to determine "whether the applicant's ability to communicate in and comprehend English is sufficient to protect the safety of the public."
3. Section 47 outlines circumstances in which the Board may find someone is not fit to practise as a social worker. This includes the applicant not satisfying the board that they are able to communicate effectively in English for the purpose of practising as a social worker (S47(2)(a), and when the Board is not satisfied that the applicant's "ability to communicate in and comprehend English is sufficient to protect the health and safety of the public" (s47(2)(b)).
4. This policy statement sets out the evidence and information an applicant must provide for the Board to be able to determine the applicant's English language competency. It also describes how the Board will assess this evidence and information.

Types of evidence for demonstrating English language competence

5. There are three types of evidence that will satisfy the Board that an applicant applying through the overseas qualification pathway has effective English language competence to practise as a social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is in addition to any references and the overall competence assessment that are required by all applicants for registration. The three types of evidence are:
 - i. **Test-based evidence** (see paragraphs 8-16 below): an applicant has achieved the required score in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic module, or
 - ii. **Education-based evidence** (see paragraphs 17-18 below): an applicant provides evidence the qualification that led to their registration as a social worker was taught and examined in English in a jurisdiction approved by the Board (Appendix 1), or
 - iii. **Registration-based evidence** (see paragraphs 19-20 below): an applicant provides evidence of recent registration or practise as a social worker in English in a jurisdiction approved by the Board (Appendix 1).
6. If an applicant meets the requirements for submitting education-based or registration-based evidence, they will be asked to submit this type of evidence when their application for registration is initially reviewed.
7. If an applicant is eligible to apply for registration through the Australian qualification pathway, they are not required to submit evidence. See paragraph 26 below.

Test-based evidence

8. The IELTS Academic module is the only test-based evidence accepted by the Board for registration purposes. Any applicant for registration may choose to provide this test-based evidence of their English language competency. However, it is required of those overseas-qualified applicants who do not meet the requirements for submitting education-based or registration-based evidence.
9. The applicant must sit the test, with IELTS on Computer or IELTS on paper, at an IELTS testing centre. Results from IELTS Online will not be accepted.
10. An IELTS Academic Test Report Form must be sent directly by applicants to the Board once completed. The form must include the test report form number, centre number, candidate number, and validation stamp.
11. The Board will verify all results through the official IELTS verification service.
12. Applicants must achieve the following IELTS Academic results:
 - i. an overall band score¹ of 7 or above, and
 - ii. a minimum section band score² of 7 in reading, listening, speaking, and writing.
13. The test must be completed within the two years immediately preceding an applicant commencing their application.
14. Applicants can take the IELTS One Skill Retake if they did not achieve the required band score in one of the sections in the first sitting. They must take this within 60 days³ of the first sitting of the test.
15. Applicants can achieve the required band scores across two test sittings if:
 - i. they sit the second test within six months of sitting their first test;
 - ii. they achieve at least 7 for reading, listening, speaking, and writing in at least one of the two test sittings, and
 - iii. no section band scores are below 6.5 for listening, reading, speaking, and writing in either of the two test sittings.
16. If an applicant has missed the required score by 0.5 in only one section and has exhausted both the two test sittings combined score, and IELTS One Skill Retake options, the Board may ask an applicant to provide supporting information (refer to paragraphs 21-24 below) to confirm sufficient English language competency.

¹ The overall score refers to the average score of the four section band scores rounded to the nearest half band. The four sections of IELTS Academic module are reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

² This refers to the overall section band score in reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

³ The 60-day period is a requirement of IELTS.

Education-based evidence

17. The applicant can provide education-based evidence if the qualification that led to their registration as a social worker was solely taught and examined in English in a jurisdiction approved by the Board (see Appendix 1).
18. The applicant must provide a transcript issued by the tertiary institution where they obtained that qualification. The Board may require additional information as proof, for example, a confirmation letter from that institution.

Registration-based evidence

19. The applicant can provide registration-based evidence if they are currently registered or licensed as a social worker in a jurisdiction approved by the Board (see Appendix 1). The applicant needs to have been registered or licensed as a social worker in the applicable jurisdiction for at least one year in the five years preceding the date of the application, and:
 - i. English is the first or official language of their current jurisdiction, and either
 - ii. English is the applicant's first language, or
 - iii. an English language test was required to gain registration or licensing.
20. If the applicant meets both the education-based and registration-based requirements, the Board recommends that the applicant provides education-based evidence (refer to paragraphs 17-18 above).

Supporting information

21. As stated in paragraphs 8-16 above, the Board will allow an applicant to supplement test-based evidence if they have missed the required score by 0.5 in only one of the sections and exhausted both the options of test combining and the IELTS One Skill Retake.
22. In these cases, the applicant must provide confirmation letters from at least two placement or work supervisors to attest to the applicant's English language competence.
23. A placement or work supervisor must be proficient in English. They can come from a position related to health or social services.
24. In the confirmation letter, the placement or work supervisor must confirm the applicant's competency in speaking, writing, reading, and understanding spoken English - through interaction with a wide range of people, including service users, their families, and other professionals. They must have observed and be familiar with the applicant's English competency in the delivery of social work services.

All evidence must be verified copies of the original documents.

25. The Board may require applicants to contact their institution, registration, or licensing bodies to provide certified documentation.

Australian qualification pathway

26. All applicants for registration with a social work qualification⁴ accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) are automatically accepted as having sufficient English language competence to practise as a social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand. They are not required to submit any evidence to attest to their English language competency.

Subsequent concerns about English language competence

27. In addition to the initial registration process, there are other points at which the Board may find a registered social worker's English speaking and communication and comprehension skills insufficient to continue to be fit to practise as a social worker, including:

- i. when the Board is notified of a concern about a social worker's social work practice
- ii. when a Professional Conduct Committee determines that the Board must consider a person's fit and proper status.

28. In cases of this nature the Board will conduct a fitness to practise check, which may require the social worker to provide evidence as set out in this policy statement. The extent of a fitness to practise check is determined case-by-case. Please refer to the [SWRB Fit and Proper Policy](#) for more information.

⁴ The AASW and Social Workers Registration Board have a Mutual Recognition Agreement to mutually recognise social workers who are credentialed in Australia or registered in New Zealand.

Appendix 1: Approved jurisdictions

The list below details the approved jurisdictions where applicants may provide education-based or registration-based evidence to attest to their English language competency.

Registration-based evidence	Education-based evidence	Test-based evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • England • Northern Ireland • Republic of Ireland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All federated states and territories of Australia¹ (except applicants for registration through the Australia qualified pathway) • All provinces and territories of Canada⁵ (except Quebec) • England • Wales⁵ • Northern Ireland • Republic of Ireland • Scotland⁵ • Singapore⁵ • South Africa⁵ • All federated states of the United States of America⁵ 	<p>It is required of those overseas-qualified applicants who do not meet the requirements for submitting education-based or registration-based evidence.</p> <p>However, any applicant for registration may choose to provide this test-based evidence of their English language competency.</p>
<p>The list will be regularly reviewed for each evidence pathway according to the following criteria:</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English is the first or official language of that jurisdiction, and • A registration or licensing system for social workers is in place in that jurisdiction, and • English is the applicant’s first language, or an English language test was required for registration or licensing in that jurisdiction, and • Social work education and practice in that jurisdiction are broadly comparable to that in Aotearoa New Zealand. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English is the first language or an official language of that jurisdiction, and • Social work education and practice in that jurisdiction are broadly comparable to that in Aotearoa New Zealand. 	

⁵ These jurisdictions are not included in the category of ‘Registration-based evidence’ because either they do not have a mandatory registration/licensing system, or they do not require overseas applicants to sit an English language test for registration purposes. Therefore, applicants can only submit ‘Education-based evidence’ or ‘Test-based evidence’ to attest to their competency.