

Policy Document

Classification of Medical Programs policy

Background

The Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) is the peak representative body for medical students in Australia. As such, AMSA is uniquely placed to comment on issues regarding medical school programs within Australia.

To gain registration as a medical practitioner in Australia, an individual must hold a primary medical qualification from an accredited university [1]. Traditionally, these degrees have been Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level 7 degrees, titled "Bachelor of Medicine" (BMed) or "Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery" (MBBS or BMBS). These degrees indicate that the holder has graduated from a medical school with competent medical skills and expertise as deemed suitable by the Australian Medical Council (AMC). [2]

Since 2011, Australian universities have shifted away from the traditionally awarded medical degrees to a Doctor of Medicine (MD) program, recognised as an AQF level 9 (Masters level) degree [2]. These changes were mostly facilitated through the expansion of existing research components within the medical degrees, to fulfil the AQF Masters (Extended) requirements [3, 4]. In each case, the AMC found no major change in the course structure, with the exception of The University of Western Australia (UWA) changing from a mixed undergraduate and postgraduate entry course to a purely postgraduate entry course [5]. Thus, students graduate with the same essential clinical skills and expertise as they did prior to the change.

There are various implications of these changes in the classifications of medical programs, including confusion about the academic rigour of different programs, the impacts on vocational training applications and entry requirements for the various programs.

Table 1: Medical programs currently offered in Australia [1]

Degree	University
AQF Level 7 – MBBS, BMBS	6: University of Adelaide, Deakin University, James Cook University, University of Tasmania, University of Western Sydney, Curtin University
AQF Level 9 – MD, MChD	14: Australian National University, Flinders University, Griffith University, University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, University of Sydney, University of Western Australia, Bond University, Monash University, University of Newcastle, University of New England, University of Notre Dame (Sydney and Fremantle), University of Wollongong

Implications of the change to MD

At the time of writing, 14 out of the 21 medical schools in Australia have replaced existing level 7 programs with the level 9 award. Whilst some universities claim that their new MD programs have increased academic rigour, the AMC has deemed them not significantly different from the level 7 programs they replaced [4, 6, 7, 8]. Despite the variation in program type, entrance requirements, curriculum and teaching methodology in Australian medical programs, all have similar objectives that link back to the AMC accreditation standards and procedures [2]. The core outcome of all Australian medical courses is to produce graduates that are competent to practice safely and effectively as interns, and have the appropriate foundation for lifelong learning and further training [4].

The Australian medical community holds concerns that the existence of a multi-tiered medical qualification system in Australia has potential to create misunderstanding around the qualifications of doctors in Australia amongst both the medical profession and the general public. There is worry that this may affect the attainment of internship and the selection of candidates into merit-based employment and specialist training programs [4,9].

MD programs at Australian universities offer increased scholarly experience in order to meet the AQF Level 9 requirements, however there is no evidence to support the different qualification levels relate to the academic clinical ability of graduates [4]. Further supporting this is that all Australian medical programs are required by the AMC to involve at least 2 years of direct patient contact through clinical clerkships in both hospitals and community practices [2], adequately preparing graduates for internship and professional practice.

At the vocational level, specialist college selection processes may favour medical graduates who hold a postgraduate qualification, including graduates of a new MD program. A specialist college may give applicants bonus points for a higher degree, peer-reviewed publications and years of experience. Currently there are no specialist colleges which explicitly state in their selection criteria that they award candidates points based on their primary medical qualification, however many colleges have vague selection criteria that does not make it clear that they do not discriminate on primary medical qualification (see Appendix A). Specialist colleges may perceive that the MD graduate is better prepared for specialist training, giving an MD applicant an advantage in applying for training positions over an MBBS applicant. The AMC believes that this misconception should be addressed through communication with the specialty colleges to clarify that such advantages do not exist [4].

Existing Doctor of Medicine award

Prior to the introduction of Masters level MD awards in 2011, the Doctor of Medicine was a higher doctorate (AQF level 10) of equal or higher standing than a Doctor of Philosophy, offered by universities to a small number of highly distinguished researchers [4]. It was considered the premier research degree awarded in medicine [4]. The introduction of the Masters level MD programs therefore threatens to devalue and cause confusion for the holders of the higher research MD awards [4, 9]. Several universities have therefore renamed or ceased intake to their higher doctorate programs, as detailed in the table below.

Table 2: Existing MD awards at Australian universities

University	Original Program	Current Program
James Cook University	Doctor of Medicine (DMed) [10]	Doctor of Medicine (Research) (DMed) [10]
The University of Melbourne	Doctor of Medicine (MD)	Doctor of Medical Science (DMedSc) [11]
Monash University	Doctor of Medicine (MD)	Ceased in 2014 [12]
The University of Queensland	Doctor of Medicine (MD)	Doctor of Medicine (Research) (DMed(Res)) [13]
The University of Sydney	Doctor of Medicine (MD) [14]	Doctor of Medical Science (DMedSc) [15]
The University of Western Australia	Doctor of Medicine (MD) [16]	Doctor of Medical Science (DMedSc) [17]
The University of New South Wales	Doctor of Medicine (MD)	Doctor of Medical Science (DMedSci) [18]
Australian National University	Doctor of Medicine (MD)	Ongoing [19]

Implications on entry pathways

Since many medical schools have adopted the shift from AQF level 7 degrees to AQF level 9 degrees, the number and variation in entry pathways has significantly increased (see Appendix B), with opportunities for universities to directly stream many postgraduate students from select undergraduate programs becoming apparent. Entry pathways can be broadly classified into 5 major groups:

1. Direct entry for high school leavers into a medical degree;
2. Provisionally reserved positions in a postgraduate medical degree for high school applicants, requiring the completion of an undergraduate degree at that university;
3. Streamed competitive entry into a postgraduate medical degree through specified undergraduate degrees;
4. Transferring from a different degree into a medical degree; or
5. Traditional postgraduate application for entry to a medical degree.

Almost all universities have adopted one, if not both, of the direct entry or provisionally reserved positions pathways, with the exception of Deakin University [20], Australian National University [21], the University of Notre Dame (Sydney and Fremantle) [22] and the University of Wollongong [23], that only provide postgraduate entry into their medical degrees. The majority of universities have maintained their postgraduate entry pathways. University of Melbourne is the only university that has specific subject prerequisites for its postgraduate entry pathway [24]. The University of Tasmania, the University of New South Wales, Bond University and Monash University have introduced 'streamed' pathways in which certain undergraduate degrees at their respective universities are given preference for a number of places in their medical degrees [25, 26, 27, 28]. For instance, Monash offers 75 out of 75 total available places in their postgraduate stream to applicants specifically applying after completing a Monash University degree in Bachelor of Biomedical Science, Bachelor of Pharmacy, Bachelor of Physiotherapy (Honours) or a Bachelor of Science with specific units [28, 29, 30]. Accessing these places occurs through a competitive entry system. Entry into the medical degrees

through this pathway can occur midway through the degree as at the University of New South Wales [8] and Bond University [27] or at the beginning of the degree as in the University of Tasmania [25] and Monash University [28].

As universities have such stringent prerequisites required for entry into graduate medical programs, this has created a system in which entry into the prerequisite undergraduate degrees approved for the streamlining becomes more competitive, perpetuating highly competitive entry standards. Often these degrees only rely on ATAR results and require certain prerequisites without consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, socio-economic or rural status, leading to increased entry standard, often without adequate alternative entry pathways to support underrepresented groups [4, 9, 30]. Thus, these undergraduate degrees perpetuate barriers to entry to disadvantaged groups whose circumstances would otherwise be taken into account by medical admissions boards through different scoring systems, and is counterproductive to efforts to create equitable and diverse cohorts of medical students, which carries on into the medical workforce.

Additionally, certain universities have guaranteed entry pathways into postgraduate medical courses from high school. Selection criteria are generally based on a high ATAR cut-off and interview. This includes University of Melbourne's Chancellor's Scholarship Program with a 99.90 ATAR cut-off plus interview and University of Sydney's ATAR cut-off of 99.95 and interview [32, 33]. Again, the strict ATAR cut-offs and little consideration of diversity poses problems for the future medical workforce.

For undergraduate medical program streamlining, Bond University, University of New South Wales and University of Western Australia have programs in which students are streamlined directly from approved degrees into the medical program. These students do not commence the degree from the beginning but rather streamline into year 3 for UNSW and year 2 for Bond and UWA [27,34].

Such stringent requirements for prior degrees or backgrounds required also impacts the diversity in life experience, problem solving skills and knowledge in our future medical profession.

Position Statement

AMSA believes that there is no difference in the clinical ability of Bachelor level and Masters level medical graduates; however, recognises differences in scholarly components of the degrees. AMSA also believes that there should be consistency of nomenclature across primary medical qualifications awarded by all universities in Australia. The multi-tiered system created by the introduction of the MD award threatens to create a misunderstanding amongst prospective students, clinicians, employers, and the general public regarding the clinical qualifications of medical practitioners in Australia. AMSA also believes that universities should take measures to ensure that diversity is maintained within cohorts.

AMSA calls upon:

1. Employers of medical professionals to:
 - a. Recognise the comparable clinical ability of the graduates from medical degrees of both AQF level 7 and 9;
2. All Australian medical schools and Medical Deans of Australia and New Zealand to:
 - a. Ensure consistency in the nomenclature of medical degrees as they are awarded. This would include:
 - i. All degrees within a particular AQF level to have an identical nomenclature;
 - ii. Not promoting and marketing the current Masters level program as a clinically superior version of the undergraduate AQF level 7 degree version;
 - b. Consider how the entry requirements and student quotas for all entry pathways influence the diversity of the medical student cohort;
 - c. Ensure that the transition from an AQF Level 7 to an AQF Level 9 degree:
 - i. Is a well-researched, structured and efficient process; and
 - ii. Has student welfare as a key priority;
3. All Australian Universities to:
 - a. Uniformly rename all research higher degrees previously named Doctor of Medicine (MD) as agreed to by the medical schools;
 - b. Provide opportunities for medical students to undergo research experience external to their degree;
4. The Australian Medical Council to:
 - a. Publicly reinforce the equivalency of Bachelor level and Masters level medical degrees in terms of clinical ability;
 - b. Formally communicate with the Australian Specialty Colleges to recognise the clinical equivalency of the Bachelor level and Masters level medical degrees;
 - c. Consider both the planning and implementation of proposed changes to medical programs (including the structure and efficiency of the process, as well as prioritisation of student welfare) in the accreditation process;
5. Specialty Training Colleges to:
 - a. Formally recognise the equivalence of Bachelor level and Masters level medical degrees with regards to clinical ability in medical practice;
 - b. Publicly clarify whether or not they currently discriminate based on primary medical degree in their selection regulations;
 - c. Work with health worker employers to not discriminate based on AQF level of primary medical degree when selecting medical graduates or doctors for vocational or training positions; however, it is appropriate for specialty training colleges to take research experience into account as a separate criterion;
6. The Australian Department of Education and Training to:
 - a. Ensure the Australian Qualifications Framework leads to comparable and consistent degree offerings and nomenclature, and monitor future changes.

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APPENDIX A:

Below are the regulations for CV scoring for training programs that were available online. None of the following colleges specifically rank MD applicants above an MBBS applicant, however some are vague in their criteria and could consider an applicant with an MD above an MBBS. Information was unable to be found for colleges not listed below.

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APPENDIX B:

Summary table for current medical degrees

University Degree	High School Entry Pathway		Graduate Entry Pathway		
	Direct Entry pathway	Provisional pathway	Streamed pathway	Transfer pathway	Additional post-graduate entry degree prerequisites
AQF 7 Medicine degrees with direct entry from high school					
James Cook University Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) (a)	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
University of Adelaide Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) (b)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Only record of study is from University of Adelaide (between 1-2 years) + biomedical subject prerequisites	N/A

University of Tasmania Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) (c)	Yes	Via the Bachelor of Medical Research (20 positions)	Via Bachelor of Medical Research (competitive entry)	N/A	N/A (will be ceased in 2018)
University of Western Sydney Bachelor of medicine / Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) (d)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Only if currently or previously enrolled in an equivalent medical degree	No additional requirements
Curtin University Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) (e)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Completion of 2 Curtin University degree level units via extension study or Open Universities Australia	No additional requirements
AQF 7 Medicine degrees with only graduate entry pathways					
Deakin University Bachelor of Medicine Bachelor of Surgery (BMBS) (f)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements
AQF 7/9 combined Medicine degrees					

University of New South Wales Bachelor of Medical Studies / Doctor of Medicine (BMed/MD) (g)	Yes	N/A	Entry to year 3 available for up to 10 Bachelor of Medical Science (UNSW) students	Only for compassionate circumstances and accepted / commenced at a different medical school	N/A
Bond University Bachelor of Medical Studies / Doctor of Medicine (BMedSt/MD) (h)	Yes	N/A	Entry to year 2 of BMedSt for Bond students eligible to graduate from the Bachelor of biomedical science or other relevant allied health tertiary degrees.	N/A	N/A

Monash University Bachelor of Medical Science / Doctor of Medicine (MD) (i)	Yes	N/A	At least 50 position reserved for Bachelor of Biomedical Science (Monash University) graduates Other eligible Monash University degrees for competitive entry: Bachelor of Pharmacy (Hons) Bachelor of physiotherapy (hons) Bachelor of Science (if subject prerequisites met)	N/A	N/A
University of Newcastle / University of New England Bachelor of Medical Science / Doctor of medicine (BMedSc/MD) (j)	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements
AQF 9 Medicine degrees with provisional entry pathways					
Flinders University Doctor of medicine (MD) (k)	N/A	Via Bachelor of Clinical Sciences	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements

Griffith University Doctor of Medicine (MD) (l)	N/A	Via Bachelor of Medical Science	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements
University of Queensland Doctor of Medicine (MD) (m)	N/A	Via any bachelor degree that can satisfy minimum recommended units. (Predominantly health science bachelor degrees)	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements (students strongly urged to complete year 2 anatomy, physiology and biochemistry)
University of Sydney Doctor of Medicine (MD) (n)	N/A	Via Bachelor of Arts OR Bachelor of Science	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements
University of Western Australia Doctor of Medicine (MD) (o)	N/A	Via UWA Bachelor degree	Via Bachelor of Science with a major in Medical sciences	N/A	No additional requirements

University of Melbourne Doctor of Medicine (MD) (p)	N/A	Via the Chancellor's Scholars Program Or guaranteed entry scheme	N/A	N/A	Any undergraduate degree with prerequisite studies in anatomy, physiology, biochemistry at a year 2 level
AQF 9 Medicine degrees with only graduate entry pathways					
Australian National University Doctor of Medicine and Surgery (MChD) (q)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements
University of Notre Dame Doctor of Medicine (MD) (r)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements
University of Wollongong Doctor of Medicine (MD) (S)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No additional requirements

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- Q. Australian National University. Doctor of Medicine and Surgery. Canberra; 2017 May [Accessed 2017 May 15]. Available from: <http://programsandcourses.anu.edu.au/program/8950XMCHD#admission-requirements>
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Policy Details

Name: Classification of Medical Programs policy
Category: A – Medical School Programs and Admissions
History: Adopted, Council 3, 2015
Reviewed, Council 2, 2017
P. Dhaliwal, A. Murray, S. White, P. Kennewell, V. Wong, P. Macintosh-Evans