

Considering studying abroad? Be well informed

The HPCSA has cautioned students who are considering studying medicine abroad to be well informed about the registration and other requirements they will need to comply with if they would like to come back and practise as doctors in South Africa after qualification.

“With the demand for medical school admission in South Africa far outweighing the number of students who can be accepted, the Council has observed an increase in the number of students pursuing their doctor dreams at medical schools abroad, only to find upon their return to South Africa, that the medical qualification obtained is not always regarded as equivalent to, or on the same standard as, those obtained locally,” Dr Letticia Moja, Chairperson HPCSA Medical and Dental Board said.

“Upon their return and after all the cost, effort and sacrifice, these students have to be registered – like all healthcare professionals in the country – with the HPCSA in order to practise. They are required to follow the same process as all foreign-qualified doctors. They are furthermore required to complete a two-year internship training at a recognised institution (if they have not done this abroad), followed by a compulsory one-year community service.”

The HPCSA’s role is to set, maintain and apply fair and acceptable standards of education and training for all the healthcare professions under its ambit. Consequently, not all medical qualifications obtained from tertiary institutions abroad are recognised by the HPCSA.

The Council has agreements with various tertiary institutions around the globe where equivalence with the South African training is established. Each application for registration is thus considered against determined requirements that need to be met in order for permission to be granted to practise in the public sector (which may include the need for additional training and/or some form of examination such as the Board examination).

The unfortunate reality is that many foreign-qualified practitioners do not pass the Board examination.

Should the person be required to sit for a Board exam, he/she needs to apply to the HPCSA with the relevant documentation and required fees. (This includes the HPCSA application form; copy of degree or other qualification; sworn translation in English; documented proof of internship training or equivalent; verification of credentials; recent Certificate of Good Standing; and, copy of passport/ID). The Professional Board may also request any other information it deems necessary.

All foreign-qualified doctors (even those who are South African) are also required to sit for and pass the final-year medical school examination if they wish to be registered in the category Independent Practice.

“As the HPCSA is mandated to protect the public and to guide the professions, it has to ensure that the standard of education is equivalent to the South African qualification and practitioners who obtained a foreign qualification have the necessary knowledge and expertise to practise their profession,” Dr Letticia Moja, Chairperson HPCSA Medical and Dental Board said.

Not only is studying abroad very costly for families, but students are far away from their family and friends; they may have to learn a new language and they often have little social support. In addition, they may learn a very different approach to healthcare and about a different disease spectrum in a different context, which may not necessarily be appropriate to the South African setting.

Therefore, when choosing a medical school abroad the Council advises students to consider the following:

- Does the medical school have a well-established, international reputation?
- Are there graduates who have passed the Board examination and are currently working in the South Africa?
- Is the language is easy to learn?

Prospective students and their families should carefully consider these options as there are many disappointed South Africans who have a foreign qualification and have not been able to work as doctors in the country.

Prospective students are welcome to contact the HPCSA for further information on e-mail info@hpcsa.co.za or tel. 012 338 3901.

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