



Credentialing the Foreign-Educated Applicant

This article is based on a presentation by James D. Heider, Executive Director, Oregon Physical Therapist Licensing Board, and Kathleen A. Luedtke-Hoffmann, PhD, MBA, PT, Managing Director of Foreign Credentialing Commission on Physical Therapy, at the 2015 FSBPT Annual Meeting.

Whether your jurisdiction receives two or 200 licensure applications per year from foreign-educated applicants, you probably wonder, “What does a ‘Credentials Evaluation’ involve?” or “Who are the people who complete these evaluations and what are their qualifications?” This presentation provided the basics of the credentialing process, the upcoming changes to the evaluation Coursework Tool (CWT), and proposed changes to the requirements to use the CWT by credentialing agencies.

Each year, about 8,000 PTs and 6,000 PTAs graduate from Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE)-accredited education programs in the U.S. On top of that, about 1,300 foreign-educated PTs apply for licensure in the United States every year. That places a strain on jurisdictional boards with responsibility for public protection.

It is a regulator’s responsibility to ensure an applicant has entry-level qualifications and can meet the public health and safety standards set out by the state. State boards protect the public by ensuring only qualified candidates are allowed to sit for the National Physical Therapy Exam (NPTE) and apply for licensure.

Foreign-educated PTs require an extra step because they are not CAPTE-accredited. And, in many cases, because of differences in U.S. educational systems and those elsewhere in the world, comparing qualifications seems like comparing apples to oranges.

That’s where credentialing agencies come in. It is the job of credentialing agencies to determine if foreign applicants meet the educational criteria to sit for the NPTE. Credentialing agencies do not accredit overseas educational programs or schools. Instead, they credential individuals.

The CWT was developed by FSBPT in response to the needs of its member jurisdictions for a standardized method to evaluate the educational equivalence of foreign-educated physical therapists. Each CWT reflects the minimum general and professional educational requirements for substantial equivalence at the time of graduation with respect to a U.S. degree in physical therapy. Adoption of the tools allows the same mobility of foreign-educated physical therapists as that afforded to U.S. educated graduates. CWTs should not be interpreted as the sole determinant of an individual’s educational preparation or competence to practice, however.

A credential is defined as a document or certificate that proves a person's identity of qualifications. Certain documentation is required. Educational documents may include transcripts or grades, a syllabus for each course, or a diploma. Verified licensure documents also may come into play. An applicant must also demonstrate English proficiency through TOEFL scores. If applicable, NPTE scores may also be used.

Applicants also need a health worker visa.

Five credential agencies are licensed to use the CWT:

- Foreign Credentialing Commission on Physical Therapy (FCCPT)
- CGFNS for use by International Consultants of Delaware (ICD)
- International Credentialing Associates
- International Education Research Foundation (IERF)
- University of Texas at Austin

All states accept the CWT.

Only two credentialing agencies are approved to issue health care certificate required by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to work as a physical therapist in the United States. FCCPT is one. CGFNS is the other.

FSBPT needed to assure state boards that the credentialing agencies they use provide quality and consistent service. So the FSBPT Foreign Educated Standards Committee created the Standards for Credentialing Agencies in 2010. The standards were developed with input from the five credentialing agencies and revised and reaffirmed in 2015. The goal is to represent the best practices in evaluation services.

To ensure consistency, the agencies were sent a questionnaire on how agencies were meeting standards and asked to provide evidence of how those standards were being met.

There are 10 standards that fall into four broad categories:

- Policies and procedures
- Adequate resources
- Evaluation process
- Administration

FSBPT wanted to ensure the agencies had written policies and procedures to maintain consistency — that they had an ongoing quality review of procedures measuring consistency and accuracy of outcomes. FSBPT also wanted to ensure they have set consistent parameters of credit conversion — how many credits is an applicant's education going to be worth. The United States is the only country that uses the credit system, so agencies need to have a consistent way to convert overseas education to credit-equivalents.

Adequate resources include being able to assess pertinent information of current and historical foreign and U.S. educational systems, programs, and earned credentials.

It's equally important that the CWT is based on U.S. educational standards. Applicants from 130

countries a year are evaluated, so it's important that the standard is laid out clearly. For that reason, a standardized application process also is in place. All applicants must submit documents in the same manner, without deviation, to be fair and consistent.

There must also be a way to verify and authenticate foreign schools exist and can grant degrees. The documents must be received in the original language, which then have to be translated. A way to identify fraudulent documents have to be created and evaluators of foreign academic documents must be qualified to collect data, review credentials, and make informed decisions. Also needed are adequate administrative services to maintain files and their confidentiality.

Since 2010, credentialing agencies have shared information so if a fraudulent applicant tries to apply at another agency they are red-flagged.

All agencies were asked to respond to the survey. To date, only FCCPT and IERF have done so. That will change now that the updated CWT, CWT 6 is implemented effective January 1, 2017.

The Federation is developing a new CWT Licensing Agreement along with the CWT 6.

In this agreement agencies will be required to pay \$1 for renewal. The license would be good for three years, at which time it could be renewed for another \$1. All staff authorized to use the tool would have to be trained by FSBPT or FCCPT. Retraining would be required every three years. Agencies also would be required to use an online electronic system to demonstrate compliance with the NPTE eligibility requirements.

Completing the questionnaire will be mandatory. Agencies will have to demonstrate a quality assurance process. They also will be required to transmit to FSBPT identifying information on candidates credentialed.



James D. Heider is the Executive Director of the Oregon Physical Therapist Licensing Board. He has been in this position for 12 years and works directly with the credentialing of foreign-educated applicants. Jim also serves as a Director on the Board for the FSBPT. Through the Federation, Jim has had the opportunity to be a contributing member of the Foreign Education Standards Committee and participated in the 2011 Coursework Tool Guidelines Task Force. In his capacity on the Federation Board, Jim serves as the Liaison to the Foreign Education Standards Committee and attends the annual Credentialing Agency Group Meetings.



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