

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL GRADUATE INTEGRATION INTO THE SUNSHINE COAST HOSPITAL AND HEALTH SERVICE (SCHHS): A PRACTICE NOTE

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ABSTRACT

Australia's healthcare workforce shortage demands innovative solutions to ensure the delivery of high-quality healthcare. International Medical Graduates (IMGs), particularly those on the standard pathway—doctors whose primary medical qualifications are obtained in noncomparable healthcare systems such as those outside the UK, USA, Canada, Ireland, or New Zealand—play a crucial role in bridging workforce gaps. However, transitioning into the Australian healthcare system presents significant challenges for these IMGs, including adapting to clinical practices, communication styles, and cultural norms [1].

This practice note outlines the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service's (SCHHS) comprehensive IMG integration program, specifically designed to address the unique needs of standard pathway IMGs. The program, structured into three phases—robust selection, structured orientation and onboarding, and ongoing mentorship—has demonstrated high retention rates, enhanced IMG confidence, and positive feedback from both participants and supervisors.

Key findings from the SCHHS initiative underscore the importance of early, structured support in mitigating the difficulties faced by IMGs during their transition. This model provides a scalable approach to improving IMG integration, enhancing patient safety, and addressing critical healthcare workforce shortages across Australia.

KEYWORDS

healthcare workforce, innovative solutions, integration program

INTRODUCTION

THE AUSTRALIAN HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE CRISIS AND THE ROLE OF IMGs:

Australia is confronting a severe healthcare workforce crisis, with an anticipated 301,000 (15.8%) increase in health and social assistance sector employment needed by

November 2026 [2]. Despite having over 850,000 registered health practitioners as of mid-2022, demand continues to outpace supply, particularly in specialized areas like general practice and emergency medicine [3]. In Queensland, regional vacancy rates have reached alarming levels of up to 30%, threatening access to quality healthcare services [4,5].

International Medical Graduates (IMGs) are a vital part of the solution, filling critical workforce gaps in both urban and regional settings [6]. However, their integration into the Australian healthcare system is fraught with challenges. They face hurdles in adapting to workplace dynamics, understanding cultural nuances, and coping with the personal and professional stresses of relocation [7]. These challenges are particularly pronounced for IMGs on the standard pathway.

To address these issues, structured and comprehensive integration programs are essential [8,9]. This paper examines the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service's (SCHHS) innovative IMG integration program, which has successfully mitigated these challenges through targeted support, structured onboarding, and continuous mentorship. The program serves as a model for enabling IMGs to transition smoothly and contribute effectively to Australia's healthcare system.

THE SCHHS IMG INTEGRATION PROGRAM:

Substantial increase in standard pathway IMG recruitment within Queensland Health Hospitals and Health Services over five years reflects a direct response to workforce shortages. This growth significantly impacted the Sunshine Coast HHS (SCHHS), prompting a collaborative initiative between the SCHHS Medical Workforce and Medical Education Unit. A structured recruitment and onboarding strategy, for the standard pathway IMG, was implemented to address the shortage of locally trained medical officers. This partnership emphasizes the importance of IMGs in ensuring adequate healthcare service delivery. The program comprises three phases:

PHASE 1: ROBUST SELECTION:

A criteria-based selection process was used to identify candidates from Queensland RMO campaign. Selected candidates (13 in 2023, 12 in 2024) underwent objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) assessing patient-centeredness, clinical judgment, communication skills, and readiness for the electronic medical record (ieMR) system. Six candidates were successful in 2023 and five in 2024.

PHASE 2: COMPREHENSIVE ORIENTATION AND ONBOARDING:

The program included a two-week extended orientation and five weeks of integrated clinical shadowing across

medicine, surgery, emergency medicine, and mental health before they commenced their clinical duties in the same unit with ongoing support throughout the term. The program covered but not exclusively,

- National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) standards [10] and SCHHS values
- The Australian healthcare system
- Medical law and risk mitigation
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices
- Clinical documentation and handover and other important topics such as ward call scenarios.
- Five simulation sessions focused on daily ward round-based practices.
- Four workshops covering key clinical topics such as plastering and suturing.
- Four procedural skills sessions (IV cannulation, nasogastric tube insertion, etc.)

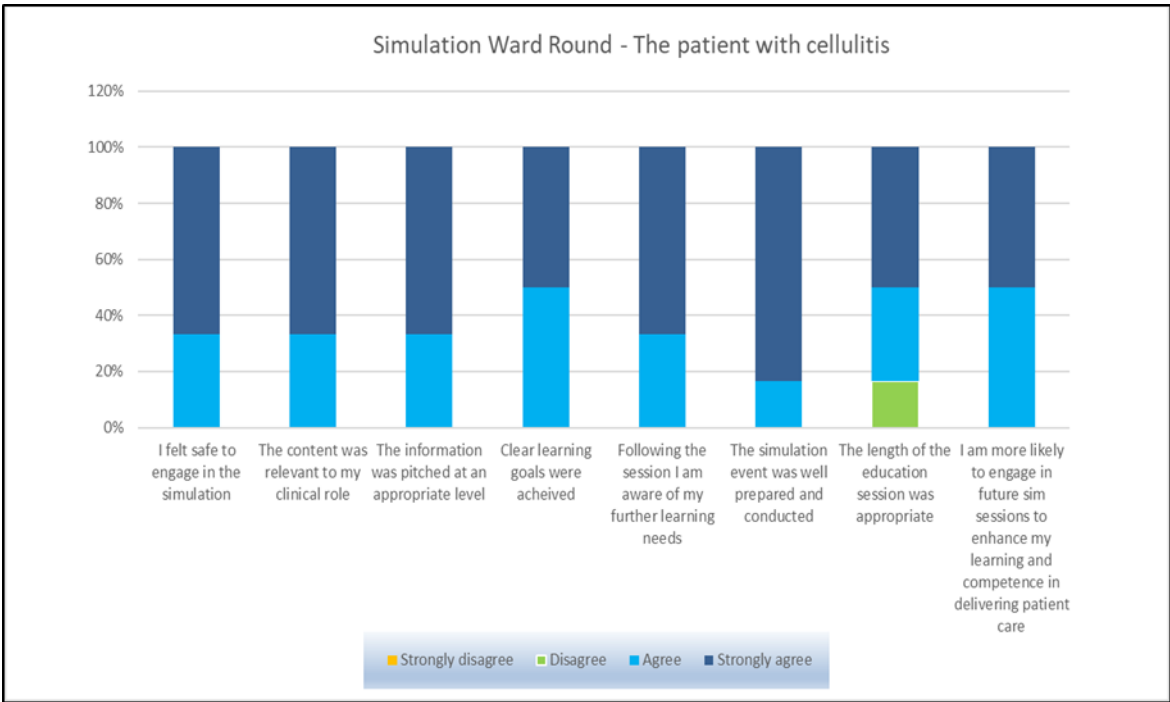
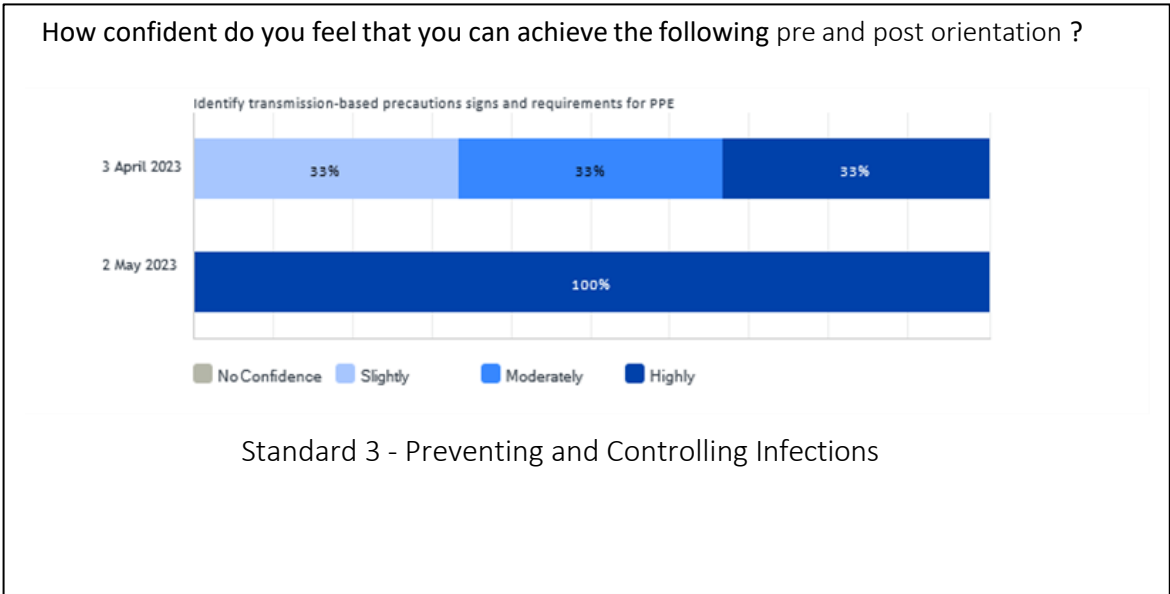
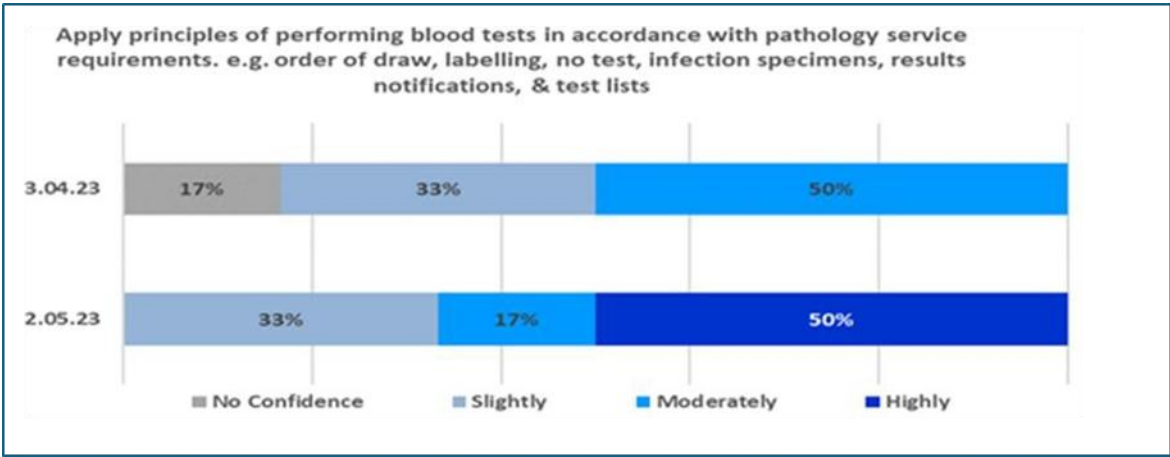
PHASE 3: ONGOING SUPPORT AND MENTORSHIP:

Continuous support and mentorship were provided throughout the initial terms. Mentors provided regular feedback, guidance, and access to resources. Extended clinical shadowing, prior to commencing clinical duties in the same allocated unit, provided continuity, and allowed senior clinicians to tailor supervision and training. Personalized support plans were developed for each IMG, ensuring appropriate goal setting and clinical placement aligned with their prior experience.

The Medical Education Officer (MEO) closely monitored all IMG, promptly implementing Individualized Improving Performance Action Plans (IPAPs) as needed. The Medical Education Unit (MEU) collaborated closely with medical workforce to ensure appropriate rostering and supervision levels.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND IMPACT:

The SCHHS program demonstrates considerable success. Pre- and post-program confidence ratings for National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) standards show significant improvement across all standards. These are a few examples of pre and post confident ratings and feedback from orientation program.



Qualitative feedback from IMGs reflects overwhelmingly positive experiences:

- "The graded exposure was very helpful. The supportive environment and understanding of our needs were instrumental to my successful integration."
- "This extensive orientation program is highly recommended. The team's consistent support was invaluable."
- "The program significantly boosted my confidence. The shadowing provided invaluable hands-on experience."
- In 2023 and 2024, 100% of participating IMGs successfully completed their terms, with many securing Principal House Officer (PHO) positions. Feedback from supervisors indicates reduced workload and improved patient safety.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALABILITY:

The program is funded by the SCHHS Medical Workforce and Medical Education Unit and will continue using this structure for future IMG recruitment. Cost-effectiveness will be closely monitored, with plans for expansion contingent upon sustained positive outcomes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The SCHHS IMG integration program effectively address integration challenge by offering early support, reducing supervisory demands, and improving patient safety. High retention rates and overwhelmingly positive feedback support its effectiveness. Further research should explore long-term impacts and the potential for wider implementation.

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