



University of Otago MB ChB Trainee Intern Elective Inquiry

1.0 Background

1.1 2019 Trainee Intern Overseas Elective Issue

In September 2019, University senior management became aware of allegations that a number of Sixth Year Trainee Intern medical students had failed to fully attend their overseas elective placements and had submitted reports that were misleading about the extent of attendance.

These allegations had been initially considered at the level of the Otago Medical School and one of its constituent schools (University of Otago, Christchurch) in June 2019. When initial inquiries by medical school staff led them to conclude that some of the allegations appeared to have substance, the matter was escalated to introduce central University involvement.

A formal investigation was then launched by the Otago Medical School, with central University support. The investigation had a number of points of focus:

- ascertaining the extent of any academic misconduct in respect of overseas elective placements
- ascertaining the extent to which individual students may have fallen short of meeting programme requirement through a failure to fully complete their electives
- addressing whether the actions of any students impacted in their Fitness to Practise
- working within the established academic misconduct regulations and processes to consider and, where appropriate, apply penalties.

Matters were complicated by a number of factors, the most important being:

- the relatively small window of time available to complete the investigation before students were due to graduate, and to take up hospital positions crucial for the health system
- the relationship between academic misconduct (assessed in this instance by a delegate of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Health Sciences, as provided for under the Student Academic Misconduct Procedures), the granting of terms (assessed by the Otago Medical School's Board of Censors), fitness to practice certification (assessed by the Otago Medical School's Fitness to Practice Committee), and medical registration (a matter for the Medical Council of New Zealand)
- the fact that students had been in receipt of Government Trainee Intern grant funding during the time overseas
- the practical issues associated with cross-checking attendance with widely dispersed hospitals and overseas medical staff.

The investigation initially focused on student placements at one particular site and found that 15 students had submitted misleading elective reports after having gone on holiday for significant parts of their elective placement time. However, based on further information received, the University expanded its investigation first to consider placements at two additional sites and ultimately to encompass all Otago final year medical students with all final year students being required to complete a declaration regarding elective attendance and the accuracy of their elective experience.

As a result of the initial investigation and subsequent declaration process, 50 students (approximately 20 percent of the class) were found by Otago Medical School's Board of Censors not to have met the requirements of terms due to failure to adequately attend their overseas medical elective.

The outcomes for these students varied according to the extent of their attendance, but comprised the following core elements:

- notification of misconduct to the Otago Medical School's Fitness to Practice Committee (and potential referral to the Medical Council)
- deferral of academic terms (which also meant these students would be unable to graduate with their peers)
- repayment of a portion of the Government-provided trainee intern stipend
- an individualised remedial work package for each student to complete additional service requirements ranging from community service to supporting health research or health services.

All 50 students signed formal binding agreements in respect of their remedial work package and the requirement to repay a portion of the trainee intern grant. Having considered the positions of each of the students involved, the Fitness Practise Committee was satisfied that, on their acceptance of the obligations under the binding agreements that they were suitable from the University's point of view to be registered by the Medical Council.

On this basis, they were able to obtain registration with the Medical Council and proceed into PGY1 positions with DHBs. The student group having now completed the obligation under the binding agreements, effectively closing the immediate issues, it became appropriate to consider the wider issues that arise.

1.2 Moving Beyond Individual Cases of Misconduct in 2019

During the investigation of 2019 final year cohort, suggestions were made of similar conduct occurring earlier than 2019 and there were some suggestions that there was a level of awareness or even complicity by University staff.

In respect of the future, attention naturally turned to the adequacy of the University systems by which requirements and expectations were communicated, electives arranged and monitoring of student performance undertaken.

While individual cases of misconduct by the 2019 final year cohort have now been fully dealt with under established process, the University recognises the desirability of a wider review of overseas medical placements. Consistent with this recognition, the University now established this Inquiry into overseas medical elective placements.

In doing so it is recorded that steps have already been taken to strengthen elective processes. The appropriateness and adequacy of the steps taken is within the scope of this review.

2.0 Inquiry Approach and Process

The Inquiry Panel

The Inquiry will be conducted by a panel of three members comprising:

- Emeritus Professor Nicholas Glasgow (Independent Chair)
- Emeritus Professor Gareth Jones
- Professor Shelley Griffiths

Administrative support for the Inquiry will be provided by the University.

3.0 Objectives and Scope of the Inquiry

The Inquiry is appointed to enquire into and comment on:

- The University's administration of sixth year electives, including the communication of its expectations and requirements in relation to those electives and its involvement in assessing the suitability of placements. The Inquiry is to focus principally on the 2019 year but is invited to consider whether any issues identified in relation to that year may have applied in earlier years.
- Any information received by the Inquiry to suggest insufficient elective attendance by Trainee Interns in years prior to 2019.
- The extent, if any, to which University of Otago staff may have been were aware of, or encouraged, insufficient elective attendance and/or the submission of misleading elective reports, or otherwise gave 2019 students grounds for thinking that their actions were acceptable.
- The adequacy of steps already taken by the Otago Medical School to address the situation for the future and any other steps it might adopt in connection with future elective management, supervision, reporting and monitoring practices.

The University does not have any ability to compel former students to engage with an inquiry of this kind, or to take action against any who might be identified as guilty of misconduct in earlier years. For that reason, identifying, or making recommendations, about individuals who may have had unsatisfactory attendance on their final year overseas electives is outside the scope for the Inquiry.

The University notes its expectation that inadequate attendance at and submission of misleading overseas elective reports, while a major breach of integrity and trust, does not directly impact on a student's clinical competencies and that historic breaches are unlikely to be an issue of concern to the Medical Council. However, where the Inquiry receives what it considers to be a serious and credible disclosure or allegation it may recommend that the person making that disclosure or allegation contact the Medical Council.

If serious allegations are made against identifiable staff, these would need to be considered by the University through appropriate employment process, and the Inquiry may recommended that the person making the allegation raise it with the Director of Human Resources at the University. Judgement or comment on the culpability of any identifiable individual staff member is outside the scope of the Inquiry.

These exclusions allow the Inquiry to offer confidentiality to those who wish to engage with it.

Key Sources of Information

As well as reviewing relevant University documents, the inquiry may seek written submissions from members of University staff, medical graduates, and such others as it sees fit.

Perspectives from the following will be particularly important:

- Otago Medical School senior leaders, and those responsible for the organisation, administration and assessment aspects of the overseas elective programme.
- Others within and associated with the University who were involved in responding to the 2019 issues.
- Recent medical graduates (particularly those in Sixth Year from 2015 to 2019).

Acknowledging the benefit of free-and-frank feedback, any submissions made will remain confidential to the Inquiry. Material from a submission may be included in the Inquiry's report at the discretion of the Inquiry panel, but only if the individual making the submission cannot be identified.

5.0 Expected Process and Timing of the Inquiry

The principal means of the Inquiry's functioning shall be by way of general and specific invitations to individuals to make written submission to the Inquiry.

The Inquiry may elect to hold discussion and meetings (including online meetings) with such individuals as they see fit.

The Inquiry shall provide its final report to the Vice-Chancellor by 30 April 2021.