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**The recognition of qualifications of refugee healthcare professionals in the  
European Union**

*A comparison of European practices*

**United Kingdom**

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The COVID-19 crisis hit the UK healthcare sector hard and revealed the systemic problems of healthcare staff shortages. During the pandemic, the involvement of foreign healthcare professionals, and in particular refugees, showed how vital their contribution was in alleviating recruitment difficulties within the national public healthcare system. The National Health Service (NHS) has also calculated that training and recruiting international and refugee doctors is cost-effective; training a doctor in the UK for around seven years costs around £300,000, while retraining a refugee doctor for less than two years costs around £25,000.

According to the latest figures from the British Medical Association (BMA), the official UK medical union, there were around 2,000 refugee doctors known to the BMA in the UK in 2022, many of whom are training as GPs to rebuild and continue their careers in a medical care system that is new to them. Several initiatives, both government funded and charitable, have been set up to support asylum-seeking and refugee healthcare professionals in their return to work.

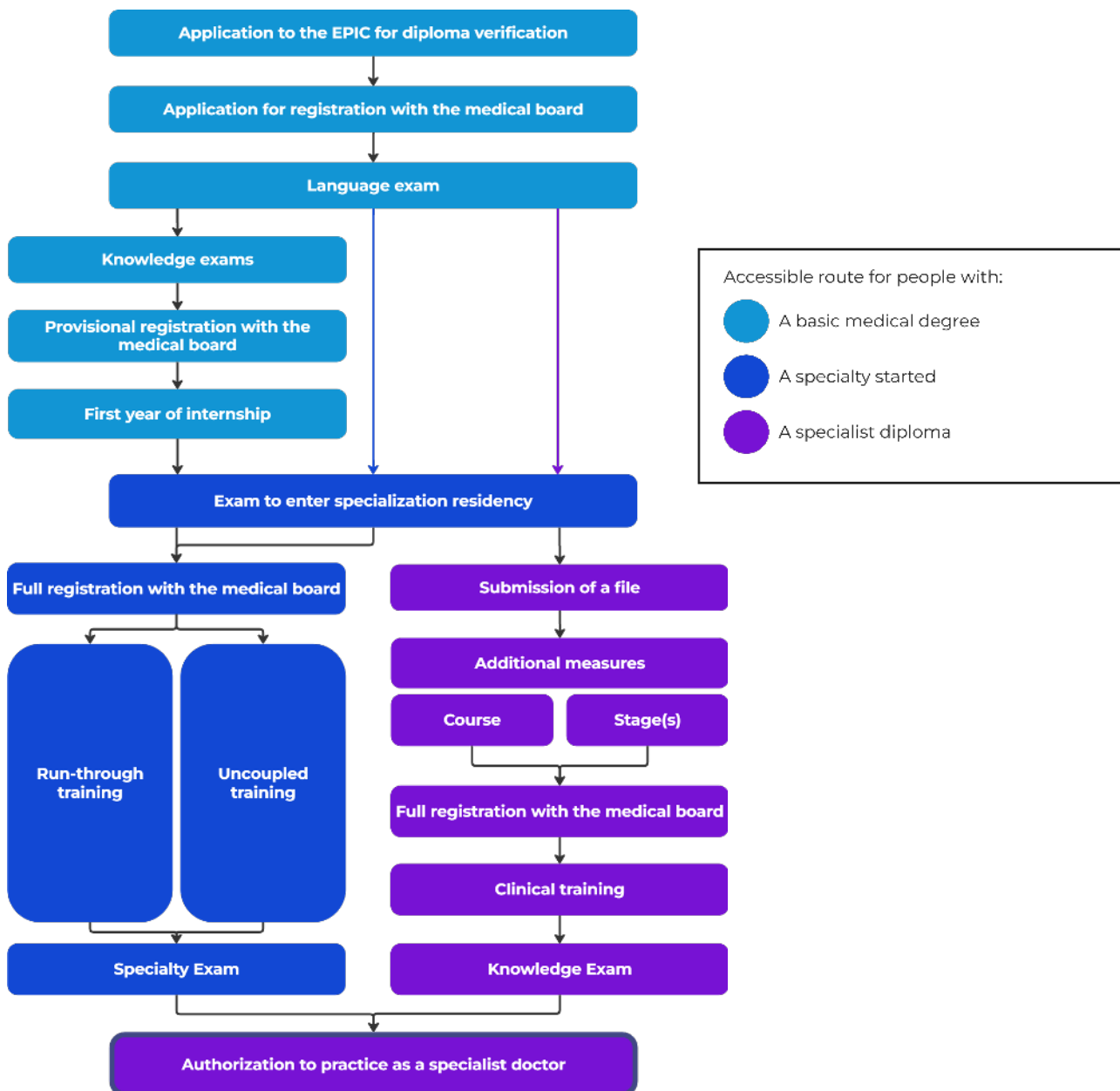


Figure 1: Scheme of the procedure for obtaining a licence to practise in the UK

## A) Information and guidance on diploma recognition

### Information and guidance platforms

The British Medical Association (BMA) doctors' union has a [web page](#) for refugee and asylum seekers to help them find their way through the various stages of applying for authorisation. This page lists all the programmes that help refugees to have their medical qualifications recognised.

A [search engine](#) on the General Medical Council website will help find the right procedure for each programme.

### Other initiatives

Numerous programmes assist foreign doctors, and refugees in particular, with the procedure for obtaining authorisation to practice (see Appendix).

Building Bridges in London, for example, provides individual assessments and career advice on resuming a medical career. The REACHE programme in Manchester offers language, clinical, pastoral, placement and employment opportunities.

The British Medical Association (BMA) doctors' union has launched the Refugee Doctor Initiative, which provides free advice to refugee and asylum-seeking doctors to help them obtain their licence to practise. The support includes personal guidance and a telephone advice service available at any time.

A member of staff within the GMC has a specific role of liaising with refugee doctor representative bodies and providing support to refugee doctors applying for registration.

## B) Verification of the diploma

The General Medical Council (GMC) is an independent organisation that helps to protect patients and improve medical education and practice in the UK. It decides which doctors are qualified to work in the UK and overseas medical education and training in the UK. It is the regulator of the medical profession in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It also promotes legislative reform, in particular to create a fair system for doctors to have their qualifications recognised and access to the medical register, regardless of where they obtained their qualifications. To work as a doctor in the UK, it is necessary to register with the GMC and to have a licence to practise.

Before applying for GMC registration, you must ensure that your qualifications are acceptable. You should check that your degree is awarded by an accredited university listed in the World Directory of Medical Schools. In some cases, the GMC may accept the original diploma even if the teaching establishment is not listed in the directory. [A web page](#) updates the universities that are not accepted and those that could possibly be accepted.

You must then have your diploma verified by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) via its online system: Electronic Portfolio of International Credentials (EPIC) (See [appendix International tools and institutions](#)).

Finally, you must apply for registration online using GMC Online. Within 5 days, the GMC will check that the application is complete and, if not, will request additional proof. Once this stage has been completed, you must send: proof of your language diploma, proof of passing the knowledge exams and proof of completion of the internship.

## C) Medical language exam

To prove your language level, you need to take IELTS or OET level C1. These are English language level tests consisting of tests of oral expression and comprehension, reading and writing.

Many programmes for qualified health refugees offer **language test preparation courses**. Like the courses offered by REACHE, these are intensive sessions in small groups covering cross – cultural communication, with all the materials and resources needed for learning. REACHE and other organisations also offer **courses in English in a medical context**. With the help of local British medical students, refugees have the opportunity to practise their English through role-playing, which also helps them to pass medical knowledge tests.

King's College developed an [online health course for refugees](#) and displaced people who wish to study a healthcare related course at a university in English.

## D) Clinical placement (optional)

This unpaid work experience enables doctors to familiarise themselves with the British health system and to observe the workings of a health service over a period of two or four months. During the placement, doctors have no responsibilities and are not able to make clinical decisions or give clinical advice.

After a period of observation, doctors may begin to take on certain clinical tasks. This will be done following a risk assessment and under the supervision of the consultant.

Tasks are generally limited to: observing consultations; assisting with patient administration; taking patient histories; performing physical examinations; observing surgical procedures.

There are privately organised intensive weekend exam preparation courses that prepare UK refugee and asylum seeking doctors and costs €480. These can be funded by the GMC for refugees.

## E) Medical knowledge tests or portfolio

### Pathway 1: PLAB knowledge tests

Doctors who have just obtained their basic medical diploma and do not have done an internship in their country of origin must take the PLAB (Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board test).

These are two-part exams, theoretical and practical, designed to test doctors' skills. Since 2024, the PLAB tests have been brought into line with the expectations of the Medical License Assessment (MLA), the tests taken by nationals at the end of the fifth year of medical school (see appendix). They will subsequently be replaced by these tests.

In 2023, the pass rate was 72% for 21,916 candidates.

A number of online resources are available to help refugees prepare for the exams (see appendix). In addition, the British Medical Association (BMA) offers a range of services to refugees, including:

- A subscription to the [British Medical Journal](#) (BMJ);
- unlimited access to [BMJ Learning](#), an online learning platform with over 900 courses, including a course to prepare for PLAB exams
- access to [BMJ Best Practice](#), a clinical decision-making tool for healthcare professionals. This application provides step-by-step advice on diagnosis, prognosis, treatment and prevention. The information is updated daily with expert advice.

The BMA also allows refugees to use its library.

Finally, it provides a [toolbox for foreign doctors](#) where you can find information on how to integrate into the workplace, a guide to the different types of doctor you might meet in hospital and the structure of the NHS

(National Health System). There is also advice on how to communicate with patients and colleagues, and what customs and practices may differentiate the UK from your home country.

### Pathway 2: Knowledge tests for GPs and specialists

For specialist doctors in training, it is possible to take the 'Royal College' exams for speciality recognition. such as the MRCP (Membership of the Royal College of Physicians). GPs take the MRCP exam from the Royal College of General Practitioners in London. Specialist doctors should take a specialist test. These tests will be necessary to continue training in the speciality.

### Pathway 3: Portfolio

This pathway is designed for doctors who have trained and qualified as GPs or specialists, have extensive experience and have passed the MRCP or specialist test. Applicants submit a portfolio (up to 1000 pages) of evidence demonstrating that they have acquired the knowledge, skills and experience required to work unsupervised as a GP or specialist in the UK. Applicants are invited to demonstrate their abilities. They must then follow an induction programme to prepare for independent practice in the National Health Service (NHS). Applications must be submitted online via the General Medical Council (GMC) website.

Recognition of the pathway may be subject to additional training measures (12 months). It may also be necessary to complete compulsory courses that can be taken online. If the pathway presented in the portfolio is approved, you can register with the GMC.

They must then follow a return to practise programme to prepare for independent practice in the National Health Service (NHS). As part of this pathway, they must pass an online multiple-choice test (see appendix) and complete a clinical placement.

## F) Specialisation

### After PLAB

After the PLAB examination, doctors can obtain either permanent registration or provisional registration, in cases where doctors who have obtained basic training do not have a traineeship or internship to their credit. If they obtain provisional registration they have to do one more year of internship.

After registration, doctors may begin to follow a speciality in the same way as nationals. Online nationals, refugees do not have priority over non-Europeans or international medical graduates for specialist posts. They must pass speciality or GPs examinations and a competitive recruitment process.

The Widening Access to Specialty Training (WAST) programme was put in place to prepare them for entry to GP and Psychiatry specialty training. There have been 1,200 applications in 2019- 2020.

Provisional registration costs €30, full registration €208.

Refugee doctors are eligible for several discounts by GMC. Fees for the primary source verification† of their medical degree and offer two free attempts at PLAB 1, with PLAB 2 discounted to half price. The application fee can be paid in 10 instalments if requested. In terms of English language testing, refugee doctors can get access to the Occupational English Test (OET), at their preferred test venue, free of charge under the OET scholarship.

### After the MRCP and speciality tests

With the MRCP, doctors can continue their foundation (residency) jobs and be registered as general practitioners. Specialists can continue their training as specialists.

Specialities are divided into run through training programmes or uncoupled training.

A run through training programme is one where you apply for your post at the start of the programme and, subject to satisfactory progress, continue for the full duration of the training programme without the need to make a further application. On successful completion of the training programme Certificate of Completion of Training (CCT) will be awarded. Examples of run through specialties include General Practice, Paediatrics and Ophthalmology.

Uncoupled training is for specialties where you must apply at core level and be successful again to enter higher specialty training. Examples of uncoupled specialties include Anaesthetics and Internal Medicine Training. Doctors' experience can be recognised in order to pass to higher speciality training without doing the core training.

## G) Accelerated access to work

### Working at a lower level

In 2021, the NHS created a new role to support refugee doctors who are not yet registered with the GMC, that of Medical Support Worker (MSW).

MSWs work as part of a multi-disciplinary professional team. In this role, they carry out a range of routine clinical tasks under the supervision of the GP responsible for the clinical area in which they are employed.

To become a medical assistant, you need to pass the English test, IELTS or the OET test.

### Programmes to support and accompany refugee doctors into work

In order to alleviate the difficulties encountered by refugee and asylum-seeking doctors and healthcare professionals in the United Kingdom in obtaining their authorisation to practice, **a number of regional support programmes have been set up to help them with their training and their transition to employment within the British healthcare services.** Most of the projects are **run by not-for-profit organisations and are funded by the NHS (National Health Service) and supported by the GMC for registration advice and guidance.** However, there are also programmes run by the public health system, trade unions or universities (see Appendix).

## H) Resuming studies

It is not possible to enter university other than in the first year for medical students who have not obtained a degree. The Medical School Council (MSC) provides advice on applications.

If you want to continue in a related non-regulated subject, the admissions department will help anyone who wants to find out more about their options.

**Study clubs** have been **set up specifically to help refugees during their medical studies.** Operating in some areas of the UK, these support clubs enable refugees to familiarise themselves with the medical English language, prepare for exams, learn about current developments in medicine and meet other students and doctors in a similar situation in order to help each other and benefit from mutual advice.

Some **specialist professional associations** also offer their own support programmes for refugee medical students. For example, the Royal College of Pathologists and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists offer access to their libraries, courses, journals, etc. for one year.

## I) Nurses

To become a nurse in the UK, you need to register with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). If you meet the eligibility criteria, you must :

### 1- **Pass a skills test**

The purpose of the test is to ensure that the applicant has the knowledge and skills required to practise the profession. It is divided into two parts:

- A multiple-response test (with calculation questions and clinical questions relating to the nursing profession)
- A practical test (10 practical cases to check the candidate's skills, values and behaviour).

### 2- **Have a good level of English (C1)**

### 3- **Work in a supervisory capacity**

Once all these requirements have been met, the nurse can officially register with the Nursing and Midwife Council to work under supervision.

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## Appendix

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### Documents required for recognition of medical diplomas and fees

- proof of primary medical qualification
- proof of internships or professional experience
- certificate of English language proficiency
- certificate of good standing
- list of professional activities over the last 5 years
- document attesting to ability to practise the profession

If the documents are not in English, the following are required: a photocopy of the original document, a photocopy of the original document stamped and signed by the translation service, a full translation of the original document (translation stamped and signed by the translation service).

Setting up an EPIC account and having your diploma certified costs around £150. However, the costs are covered by the GMC for refugees.

### PLAB exams (corresponding to the start of residency) and MRCGP (generalist)

The first part is a written test, PLAB1 (success rate 72% in 2023). Examination dates are offered 4 times a year and the test can be taken 4 times (a fifth time is possible following training).

The test assesses the ability to apply knowledge to patient care. It does not test the ability to memorise and recite data. PLAB 1 is a written examination consisting of 180 multiple-choice questions which must be answered within three hours. Each question begins with a brief scenario followed by a question. The correct answer must be chosen from the five possible answers given. Examples of corrected tests are available [here](#).

The second part is practical, PLAB 2 (success rate 62% in 2023).

This is a clinical examination consisting of 16 scenarios with dummies or actors, each lasting eight minutes. The aim is to reproduce real-life situations, such as a simulated consultation or an intensive care unit.

These practical tests take place throughout the year at a clinical assessment centre.

Fees are €300 for Plab 1 and €1,120 for Plab 2, but only €60 for refugees. They are also entitled to two free trials.

#### **Resources**

The '[blueprint](#)' is a guide to preparing for the theory test.

To prepare for the 'good medical practice' requirements, you can use an [explanatory guide](#) and interactive guides:

-the [online interactive tool Good medical practice in action](#)

-[Welcome to medical practice in the UK online interactive tool](#).



Examples of possible scenarios for the practical tests are available [here](#).

[Top tips from examiners](#) have been collated and there is also a [blog with tips from examiners](#).

In addition, a GMC handbook, [Outcome for graduates](#), supplemented by [Practical skills and procedures](#), sets out the knowledge, skills and behaviours that new UK medical graduates should have.

- **MRCP tests**

#### MRCP Theory Part 1 and 2

This is a one-day examination with two three-hour papers, with 100 multiple-choice questions per paper. The test is taken on computer via a UK invigilation service and can be taken from your home country. The cost is €550 for non-refugees and €60 for refugees, with two free attempts.

The examination tests the ability to apply clinical understanding, make clinical judgements and take responsibility for :

- prioritise lists of diagnoses or problems
- plan the investigation
- select an immediate management plan
- select a long-term management plan
- assess prognosis

#### PACES (practical part)

Candidates are required to perform five patient (or surrogate) examinations of five minutes each, assessed by two examiners each time. The test is designed to recognise skills in physical examination technique, identification of signs of illness, communication and clinical judgement, and management of patient concerns.

The cost is 720 euros

- **MCQ test**

There are 2 parts to the International Induction Programme (IIP) and the Return to Practice (RtP) Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) assessment. Both are designed to assess some of the essential competencies outlined in the national person specification and are based around clinical scenarios. Applicants will first be asked to complete a professional dilemmas (PD) paper, followed by a clinical problem solving (CPS) paper.

The two papers of the MCQ assessment (Professional Dilemmas and Clinical Problem-Solving) are able to be taken separately. Candidates will be permitted four funded attempts at each component of the MCQ assessment and on passing, the result is valid for 12 months for each paper.

Assessments are available at locations throughout the UK and in approved sites worldwide. There are Eight assessments per year.

## Refugee support programmes

### **Association programmes funded by the NHS**

- The [Bridges programme](#) aims to help refugee doctors living in Glasgow, Scotland, to prepare for language and professional exams, provide career guidance and find clinical placements.
- The [Building Bridges](#) programme supported 477 refugee doctors between 2009 and 2021, 336 of whom were recruited at the end of the project. The programme offers preparation for the theoretical and practical knowledge test, professional language training, preparation for work in the NHS, clinical placements and help with registering with the CMG and finding work.

- The [Lincolnshire Refugee Doctor Project](#) helps qualified refugees to obtain their licence to practise in the county of Lincolnshire. As well as providing support in preparing for the test, the programme also helps doctors and their families to settle and integrate into the local community.

The [Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit \(RAGU\) at London Metropolitan University](#) advises refugee healthcare professionals by offering clinical placements, practical workshops, meetings with a guidance counsellor, etc.

### **Programmes supported by Multiple stakeholders ie the National Health Service, University and Hospital Foundations**

- **The NHS [refugee nurse support pilot programme](#) , supported by two associations and a university, helps refugees qualified as nurses to resume their careers in the NHS.** It is a tailor-made training programme which, in addition to the teaching provided, supports nurses in their job search. In September 2021, a group of 25 refugee nurses from refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon were supported and all were working in 2022. When people are not ready to work as nurses, they start working as care assistants, while they progress and get used to the English care system.
- **REACHE** (Refugee and Asylum Seekers Centre for Healthcare Professionals Education) is the largest and oldest UK programme, established 21 years ago with over 700 healthcare professionals supported since 2003. The programme run by doctors, language and communication skills teachers and pastoral supports over 100 doctors a year and some nurses. It offers personalised support to healthcare professionals living across the UK and has 20% higher pass rates in the language and clinical exams than the GMC pass rate average. Reache works closely with the NHS, local University and large hospital trusts, as well as agencies such as JobCentre Plus and Manchester City Council. The aims are to **prepare refugee and asylum-seeking doctors for real working life**, alongside passing the PLAB **examinations and to advise refugees on their pathway to employment in the NHS**. To prepare for the PLAB practical examinations, it is possible to practise with mannequins and other equipment. REACHE also funds external preparatory courses.
- **[The Investing in People and Culture \(IPC\) Refugee Doctors Project](#)**, known as REPOD (Resettlement Programme For Overseas Doctors), helps up to 10 doctors a year who arrive in the UK as refugees to integrate into the NHS. REPOD is a partnership between IPC, Health Education England North East (HEENE) and health services in the North East of England. As part of this project, IPC provides English language training two days a week to enable refugee doctors to take the IELTS or OET exams. It also helps prepare for the PLAB tests. Working with local health organisations, IPC helps these doctors find clinical placements and apply for jobs in the NHS. After the first four years of the programme, 75% of participants have successfully registered with the GMC and are working in the NHS.
- **GMC support**

The [GMC](#) works closely with refugee doctors and their organisations. One of its members has the role of liaising with refugee doctors' representative bodies and providing support to refugee doctors applying for registration.

Refugee doctors can benefit from a number of reductions and exemptions (diploma validation, language and medical tests).

Other refugee support programmes can be found at the following links:

- [Phoenix Project](#)
- [Refugee Council](#)
- [Scotland Deanery - Refugee Doctors' Programme](#)
- [Scottish Refugee Council](#)
- [Wales Deanery - refugee doctors](#)
- [WARD \(Wales\)](#)