



Countdown clock starts July 1

ASWB's Board of Directors set July 1, 2016, as the implementation date for establishing procedures to ensure member jurisdictions are in compliance with the exam use policy

Exceptions are like raindrops. A drop here and a drop there don't amount to much. But when enough drops fall, before you know it you've got a destructive flood on your hands. That's the idea behind a recent ASWB Board of Directors decision on the association's examination policy.

At its January meeting, the ASWB Board of Directors discussed the issue of maintaining exam validity and defensibility when it is known that the exams are being used in ways that are outside of policy. At present, that inconsistent use occurs in 24 instances in various licensure categories across several jurisdictions. One example: candidates being approved to take an exam for which they do not meet education or experience levels established in policy.

"It's important to understand that the exams are not hierarchical," said Dwight Hymans, ASWB executive vice president. "The Bachelors exam has been validated to measure minimum competence for the bachelors scope of practice, and it is the same for the Masters exam and the Clinical exam—they also are tools to measure the scopes of practice identified for these exam categories. If too many people take an exam for which they do not meet the qualifications according to policy, there is a risk

of invalidating the exam for its correct use."

The idea is that the examinations are designed to support the concept that Bachelors, Masters and Clinical scopes of practice are distinct scopes, not levels of practice that somehow supersede or encapsulate each other. For example, Clinical social work practice is just that – Clinical practice. And passing the ASWB Clinical examination doesn't necessarily mean that the successful candidate possesses the knowledge, skills, and abilities to practice at the Baccalaureate level, because the ASWB Clinical examination does not test Bachelors content.

In fact, passing the Masters exam means that the test-taker has demonstrated minimum competency in the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform master's social work only. The Masters exam does not test for any other scope of practice and a passing score does not demonstrate the test-taker's ability to practice competently in any other category of practice.

These three practice categories have been defined by social workers themselves through their responses to the practice analysis that ASWB conducts every five to seven years as part of its exam

development process—and that has been true since the first practice analysis was conducted in 1981-1982. Bachelors educated social workers are surveyed about tasks performed in their practice as a bachelor social worker; master’s educated social workers are surveyed about tasks performed in their practice as master social workers; and so on for clinical social workers and masters educated social workers with two or more years of experience in non-clinical or macro-practice settings (the Advanced Generalist exam category). The content outlines that form the blueprints for each exam bear out the differences. Rather than thinking of the exams as hierarchical, it is more accurate to think of them as parallel.

For the ASWB examinations, the difficulty occurs when a candidate takes an examination that doesn’t match his or her education and experience. Because the examinations use test-taker response data to monitor the quality and consistency of each test question, the mismatch between the test’s target audience and the individual test-taker opens up the possibility for that data to be clouded.

“It’s true that the numbers of candidates currently taking a test not intended for them is still small enough that it’s having little effect on our item data,” Hymans said. “But if these policy exceptions continue, the potential is there for the data to be skewed.”

Enough skewed data, and test items that once performed the way they’re supposed to start showing problems, and new items being pretested (a type of audition in which they’re included in a test as nonscored questions in order to

gauge their performance) become difficult to establish as valid, reliable measures. Obviously any fixes are extremely expensive, and along the way, public confidence in the validity of the licensure examination can begin to erode.

Historically, the Board has allowed members to choose which exam to use for each licensure category in their state or province. While members were encouraged to follow the exam use policy, ASWB did not object if a member board deviated from policy. However, as the use of the exam expands, the potential for inappropriate use also increases.

For that reason, the Board determined that compliance with policy was a priority. “Enforcing appropriate use of the exams helps maintain the highest psychometric and legally defensible standards on behalf of our members that use the exam(s) as part of their licensing process,” wrote ASWB CEO Mary Jo Monahan in a memo announcing the implementation plan to member board chairs and administrators in May. ASWB consulted with HumRRO, its psychometric consultant, about the impact of this issue and HumRRO advised ASWB to use all exams for their intended (validated) purpose. The purpose of each exam is defined in item 14 of policy [2.1 Procedures](#).

The process to move ASWB member boards toward a consistent, policy-driven use of the ASWB examinations begins July 1, 2016. That’s when the clock starts ticking on a five-year time period within which members are expected to comply. As summarized in the announcement:

- Members wishing to use the exams outside the exam use

policy must submit a written request for an exception. Staff will review the request with our psychometric consultant and/or our test administration vendor [Pearson VUE] and make a recommendation to the Board of Directors. The Board will consider the request and make a final decision. The decision will be communicated to the member.

- Members currently using the exam(s) outside the exam use policy will be notified. Members will be given three options: change the necessary jurisdictional laws/regulations/policies; request an exception (as described above); cease using the exam(s) for the noncompliant purpose. Members must complete one of these options no later than five years from the July 1, 2016, implementation date.
- If an exception is not granted by the Board of Directors, ASWB will no longer be able to support the validity of the exam(s) used for the noncompliant purpose.

The Board made the decision to implement these procedures to help members make the change now to avoid having to make legislative changes later. The five-year time frame is intended to give members time to make legislative changes if necessary, although it is hoped that this will not be the case in the majority of jurisdictions where change must be undertaken. “It is not ASWB’s intent to place extra burdens on our membership,” Monahan concluded in her announcement, “and we will provide assistance to members

making efforts to change laws and regulations that conflict with the exam use policy.”

The bottom line, says Hymans: “Everyone is putting themselves and the exam at potential risk when they use the exam outside policy. There’s a bigger picture to consider. It’s not just ‘what works for my jurisdiction.’”

The full description of the procedures summarized above was included in the announcement sent by email and U.S. postal mail to member board chairs and administrators and is available upon request. Hymans is the point of contact for any questions or if members need assistance. He can be reached at dhymans@aswb.org

or at 800.225.6880, ext. 3110.

Exam validity through the lens of mobility

In the last 10 years, score transfers have doubled as the social work workforce has become more mobile. The social work licensing exams are recognized as a North American test: pass an exam in one jurisdiction and the pass is accepted in every other member jurisdiction that uses that exam as part of its licensure process. In Canada, two provinces currently use the exams as part of registering social workers, and other provinces are beginning to explore use of the exams as well.

When license categories are equivalent from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, as recommended in ASWB’s Model Social Work Practice Act, a social worker theoretically should be able to move from one jurisdiction to another and transfer a license with relative ease. There are exceptions, however, such as in states where the exam required by jurisdictions for the same license category differs.

In those situations, the social worker has a decision to make: Move and take a different exam to qualify for the equivalent license or don’t move. Sometimes, as with a job transfer or a military deployment, the social worker has no choice but to move and take another exam. In some cases, if the jurisdiction is using an exam outside exam policy, the social worker could be required to take an exam that he or she is not qualified for based on eligibility criteria established in policy. Consider the following.

An MSW educated social worker who passed the Masters exam and is issued a license in one jurisdiction plans to move to another jurisdiction to take a new job. The new jurisdiction has an equivalent license category but requires a passing score on the Bachelors exam. In order to practice in the new state, the social worker will have to take and pass the Bachelors exam, even though the job the social worker will perform will be masters social work and the social worker does not meet the eligibility standards for the Bachelors exam according to policy.

This situation illuminates challenges that jurisdictions must overcome if mobility is to be achieved “in this lifetime.” Although the license is the same in both jurisdictions, the qualifications for licensure are not consistent. Furthermore, if the required exam is not appropriate for the scope of practice then public protection is potentially at risk. The scopes of practice identified in the model law are consistent with the licensing exams used to test competency for that scope. The [model law](#) is available to jurisdictions to refer to when defining scopes of practice to achieve consistency and license comparability.