

ACRS Submission on proposed improvements to New Zealand's Graduated Driver Licensing System



About the Australasian College of Road Safety

The Australasian College of Road Safety was established in 1988 and is the region's peak organisation for road safety professionals and members of the public who are focused on saving lives and serious injuries on our roads.

The College Patron is Her Excellency the Honourable Sam Mostyn AC, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia.

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Introduction

The Australasian College of Road Safety is the region's peak membership association for road safety with a vision of eliminating death and serious injury on the road. Our members include experts from all areas of road safety including policy makers, health and transport professionals, academics, community organisations, researchers, federal, state and local government agencies, private companies and members of the public. The purpose of the College is to support our members in their efforts to eliminate serious road trauma through knowledge sharing, professional development, networking and advocacy. Our objectives include the promotion of road safety as a critical organisational objective within government, business and the community; the promotion and advocacy of policies and practices that support harm elimination; the improvement of relative safety outcomes for vulnerable demographic and user groups within the community; the promotion of post-crash policies and practices; and the promotion of a collegiate climate amongst all those with responsibilities for and working in road safety.

The College believes that we should prevent all fatal and serious injuries on our roads; the road traffic system must be made safe for all road users; system designers should aim to prevent human error and mitigate its consequences; life and health are not exchangeable for other benefits in society; and that all College policy positions must be evidence based.

The current consultation arises from an action in the New Zealand Government's Road Safety Objectives document:

Identify opportunities to improve the Graduated Driver Licensing System, taking into account road safety (for example, ensuring drivers are adequately trained) alongside making a licence cheaper and easier to obtain.

The focus is on New Zealand Class 1 (car) licence holders progressing through the licensing system, and there are no plans or changes proposed to overseas licence conversion or test fees.

The proposed changes as outlined in the consultation document are:

- Remove the full test and introduce mitigations to maintain safety outcomes
- Introduce a clean driving record requirement to the restricted licence
- Reduce the demerit threshold for novice drivers to have their licence suspended
- Introduce a zero-alcohol limit for novice drivers
- Improve NZTA's oversight of approved advanced driver courses
- Reduce the number of vision tests

The accompanying Interim Regulation Impact Statement (RIS) considers 3 options: 1) status quo; 2) removing the full test only; 3) removing the full test and introduce new safety measures, with Option 3 preferred by the Minister. The RIS also notes that consultation to date has taken place with the New Zealand Transport Agency, Accident Compensation Corporation, New Zealand Police, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, Ministry of Regulation, Department of Internal Affairs, Treasury, and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, as well as the Automobile Association, and the Driving Change Network (a driver licensing advocacy group).

ACRS response to the Consultation Draft

Background

New Zealand led the way in licensing reform as the first country to introduce a Graduated Driver Licensing System (GDLS) in 1987. While some adjustments have been made over the years, there are opportunities to strengthen the GDLS in line with international evidence and best practice to lift safety performance, and improve equity and efficiency.

More than 1 million people over 16 years in NZ do not have a full licence, and half of those people do not have a licence at all. Three in 10 novice drivers in Aotearoa New Zealand either become stuck on a learner or restricted licence, or are slow to progress to their full licence.(1) Driver licence progression is linked to improved safety, and licence acquisition provides better access to employment, education and health services, and better connections and support with friends and whanau.(1) The overall policy objective is to make getting a driver licence 'cheaper and easier', while supporting drivers to have the skills to drive safely.

Among countries with developed GDLS, NZ holds the second highest youth-fatality rate for drivers and car occupants (following only the United States).(2) Young people are significantly over-represented in deaths and serious injuries across New Zealand. While young people, aged 15-29 years, only make up 20.5% of the population, young drivers account for 36% of car driver-related death and serious injuries nationally.(3)

Other jurisdictions across Australasia followed New Zealand's lead and have introduced evidence-based requirements/conditions in recent decades. This has resulted in significant improvements in safety outcomes for novice drivers.

The proposed changes draw upon aspects of best practice in other jurisdictions such as Australia, such as a lower demerit threshold for novice drivers. While jurisdictions such as Australia do not have a full licence test, they have several other evidence-based requirements in place to ensure the safety of novice drivers, such as:(4)

- A longer minimum learner period (12 months compared to 6 months in New Zealand)
- 120 mandatory supervised driving hours for learners (logged) (not required in New Zealand)
- A longer minimum holding period for a restricted licence (up to 3 years compared to 12-18 months in New Zealand)
- A computerised hazard perception test (from learner to restricted) (hazard perception is currently tested as part of the full licence test in New Zealand)
- A higher minimum full license age (20 years in most states (22 years in Victoria) compared to 17.5 in New Zealand if a defensive driving course is completed).

NZ has an opportunity to improve its GLDS in line with best practice and achieve safety and wider social and economic outcomes.

ACRS feedback

a) Do you support removing the full licence test with the proposed safety mitigations?

No, unless other safety mitigations are put in place.

While the proposed changes will make it easier to obtain a full licence for many people, without introducing other measures across the GDLS, the proposed changes could have a negative impact on safety for young people and other road users. This has the potential to worsen inequitable safety outcomes for young people, Māori and other minority groups who are already over-represented in deaths and serious injuries across New Zealand.(3) They could also have other negative unintended consequences for those who are disadvantaged, making it overly difficult for many novice drivers to progress to their full licence and increased suspensions for licensing related offences.

Compared to Australia, New Zealand has fewer competency requirements before driving solo and unrestricted. These measures contribute significantly to the skill development of novice drivers and reduced crash risk.(4) There are also differences in testing requirements before moving onto a restricted licence, with the assessment in Australia covering the diversity of skills mandated through supervised hours. Some states also have a Competency Based Training and Assessment option.

Novice drivers in Australia are more mature when they obtain their full licence. This difference in cognitive maturity is significant for novice driver crash risk.(4)

Australia also provides more investment and support for disadvantaged learner drivers who do not have access to a supervisory driver or vehicle and who are not able to afford professional driving lessons to gain their supervised driving hours. Learner Driver Access Programs and Learner Driver Mentor Programs are available in most Australian jurisdictions and these have been shown to be highly effective.(4-6)

Introducing tougher restrictions as a mitigation for removing the full test will not ensure safety outcomes. Being fully compliant does not necessarily equate to being a safe driver. Under the proposed changes, a restricted licence holder could obtain their full licence after having little or even no driving experience as long as they have maintained a clean driving record over that time. A person could gain their restricted, go overseas for 18 months, and then return to New Zealand and be issued a full licence.

This is especially problematic because learner drivers are currently not required to obtain a minimum number of supervised and diverse practice hours. When people obtain their restricted licence, many people may not have the required experience to be skilled enough to drive solo, even if they've passed the test with no critical errors detected.

Evidence shows that minimum supervised hours are effective. Research indicates the optimal level of supervised hours to be between a minimum 80 and 100 hours to a maximum of around 120 hours, during which the increased experience gained outweighs increased crash risk due to increased exposure.(4) Research also indicates that varied driving experiences with increasing degrees of complexity are needed to effectively reduce crash risk as a novice driver.(7)

Removing the full test also doesn't address the full complexity of the barriers that people are currently experiencing, including at the learner stage. These barriers to accessing and progressing through the system are complex. Evidence shows that some people need more support than others and this requires tailored

solutions.(1) Unless these structural inequities are addressed and the right level of support provided to novice drivers through the learner period, many people will remain unable to obtain a full licence

The proposed changes are also likely to have negative unintended consequences for equity more broadly, including making it harder for some people to get their full licence (with negative impacts to the economy) and to worsen hardship that many people experience with the justice system.

In Victoria, Australia the Drive Test (practical test) was designed to be calibrated to 120 hours when those hours were mandated so that if the applicant did not have the experience required then they should not pass the test and progress. This helps ensure that mandatory supervised hours were completed.

b) Do you support a zero-tolerance clean driving record requirement in the restricted stage?

No

Introducing a zero-tolerance clean driving record (with a restart) for all traffic offending is problematic and not aligned with best practice in Australia. There should be an expectation that novice drivers are compliant with regulations for high-risk behaviour such as drink driving, mobile phone use, and speeding, and there should be effective penalties in place for these offences (for all road users). However, a zero-tolerance for all traffic offences (with the proposed restart) could make it overly challenging and slow to progress – negatively impacting economic outcomes. The evidence also shows that drivers who progress through the licensing system at a relatively normal pace, from learner through to full driver, are significantly less likely to be involved in a crash (NZTA, 2024). Having to restart to the beginning of the restricted stage could also cause frustration, avoidance, and create a negative learning experience for some people.

c) Do you support halving the demerit threshold for learner and restricted licence holders?

Conditional yes, if the wider fines and penalties system is reformed to address safety and equity issues.

Under the current proposal, halving the demerit threshold for licence suspension could lead to more people losing their licence for vehicle or licensing relating offences that are often due to systemic barriers. Some of these offences are relatively low-risk yet equivalent to high-risk road user offences such as excessive speeding. New Zealand also currently has no demerit points on restraints or red-light running. These inconsistencies do not send the right message about the risk of harm and have negative impacts on equity for those experiencing barriers to compliance. These changes should be made in the context of a wider review of road safety penalties.

Although demerits are effective for many people, especially as they reach the licence threshold, high-risk repeat offenders do not respond to deterrence in the same way and require a different approach and set of tools, such as interlocks and/or case management. Until these systemic and behavioural issues are addressed across licensing and other areas such as substance use, with the right support and tools in place, many people will face licence suspension sooner and may continue to drive unlicensed with implications for safety and equity.

In addition to young people and Māori being over-represented in deaths and serious injuries, they are also disproportionately impacted by the current penalty system. The proposed change to halve the demerit threshold, without wider considerations to equity, could worsen this existing inequity.

d) Do you support a zero-alcohol limit for learner and restricted licence holders?

Yes

e) Do you support the proposed changes to NZTA's oversight of course providers?

Yes

f) Do you support the reduced eyesight testing requirements?

Conditional yes, if reducing eyesight testing requirements are made upon expert advice from the NZ Association for Optometrists.

g) Do you have any other comments on any of the proposed changes?

Unless wider changes are made across the system, the proposed changes could negatively impact safety and equity and with negative unintended consequences for the economy. More needs to be done to ensure that learner drivers receive the right level of training and experience and support progression at the learner stage. Introducing restrictions on novice drivers as a mitigation for removing the full test focuses on compliance rather than ensuring novice drivers have the right foundation to be safe drivers. A more holistic approach needs to be taken to ensure any penalty-related changes are considered in the context of the overall penalty system and how to lift performance to achieve safety and equity outcomes.

The consultation documents acknowledge that the hazard perception element of the full test could be moved to a computerised test during the learner stage (as is done in Australia). This would be essential as hazard perception is critical to safety and directly linked to crash risk.

To ensure safety, New Zealand must introduce additional evidence-based measures that have proven to be effective. Whilst aspects of the proposed changes are implemented in Australia, they need to be considered in the wider context of best practice and the overall driver training and licensing system.

Conclusion and Recommendations

NZ has an opportunity to improve its GLDS in line with best practice and achieve safety and wider social and economic outcomes.

The ACRS understands the overall policy objective but has significant concerns about the proposed safety mitigations if the full licence test is removed. Safety outcomes should not be compromised to make it easier to obtain a driver's licence. The ACRS does not believe that the proposed changes have struck the right balance in this regard.

The ACRS strongly recommends that the NZ Government prioritises safety and more comprehensive change across the GDLS.

We recommend a best-practice and evidence-based approach to improving the GDLS:

1. Not removing the full licence test unless additional safety measures are introduced. These measures could be implemented through a staged approach and should include:
 - a. Extending the minimum learner licence period to 12 months.

- b. Introducing 80 – 120 hours of logged mandatory supervised driving practice. This could start with a minimum of 60 hours and. would require more support for those who are disadvantaged.
 - c. Introducing a computerised hazard perception test to the learner stage.
 - d. Increasing the minimum age to obtain a full licence to 20 years old.
 - e. Introducing a zero-alcohol limit for learner and restricted licence holders.
 - f. Reviewing road safety penalties to ensure they align with risk to support safety and equity.
2. An independent evaluation of safety and equity impacts of any changes within three years of implementation to inform ongoing improvements.

ACRS appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposal and contribute to improved road safety in New Zealand. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you need any further information.



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