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Australian Graduated Driver Licensing Systems

By Teresa Senserrick PhD The George Institute for International Health, Sydney, NSW, Australia

Key words: graduated driver licensing, learner period initiatives, licence testing, provisional restrictions

Abstract

This paper provides an update to an early 2007 review of graduated driver licensing models in operation in Australia and the range of requirements and restrictions for learner and provisional drivers in each state and territory. The most common changes are reviewed, including their likely effectiveness in reducing young driver crashes. These include an increase in the minimum learner period duration and supervised driving hours required, hands-free mobile phone restrictions, hazard perception testing in different phases and various night-time driving and passenger restrictions. Overall, the changes should contribute to considerable crash reductions; however, there is a need to consider potential unintended consequences and to develop appropriate alternatives or support programs for disadvantaged youth and communities.

Background

Graduated driver licensing systems, that is, systems that include supervised learner periods followed by provisional or probationary periods prior to a full ("unrestricted") licence, exist in all Australia states and territories (herein collectively referred to as "states"). Early in 2007, the first author reviewed the systems operating in Australia and summarised key requirements and restrictions for each state and territory (Senserrick, 2007). In the two years following, significant changes have been effected in several states. This paper seeks to update the earlier publication and present the current systems in operation in Australia, with comments on the likely crash reduction benefits of recent developments. More detailed discussion of individual components and their effectiveness can be found in a prior publication (Senserrick & Whelan, 2003).

Graduated Driver Licensing Models

Several Australian states have moved beyond the typical three-stage learner to provisional to full licence model, with Western Australia (WA) including two learner periods and Queensland (QLD), Tasmania (TAS) and Victoria (VIC) joining New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia (SA) in including two provisional periods. Other jurisdictions are also reviewing their current graduated driver licensing (GDL) models and considering spilt learner and/or provisional stages.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Northern Territory (NT) and South Australia (SA) all allow a choice of two parallel tracks to progress through the learner phase to the provisional phase. The traditional path allows learner drivers to arrange their own supervised driving practice, which may or may not include professional instruction, and requires successful completion of knowledge and practical driving tests to proceed to the provisional stage. The alternative is collectively termed

here as competency based training and assessment (CBTA). In addition to educational components, CBTA requires learners to progress through a series of specified in-vehicle drives with an accredited instructor, with progress to provisional licensure occurring on successful completion of all components and not requiring a traditional practical driving test. The ACT also offers an educational alternative for progressing through the provisional period, including an optional course at six months, incorporating group-based activities and discussions on early provisional driving experiences, which allows removal of P-plates and a higher demerit point threshold for the remainder of the provisional period.

Requirements and Restrictions

Tables 1 and 2 respectively summarise key components of the learner and provisional licence periods in each Australian jurisdiction. While all apply to applicants at least under 21 years of age, some exemptions or alternatives apply for older applicants; primarily reduced minimum learner and provisional licence holding periods between 21 to 25 years, and some are waived if over 25.

The most significant changes to the learner period include increases in the minimum duration from 6 months to 12 months and the introduction of extensive supervised driving requirements (100-120 hour minimums). QLD, following

Table 1. Learner Licence requirements and restrictions in Australian graduated driver licensing systems

Component	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS*	VIC	WA
Minimum age: years	15.75	16	16	16	16	16	16	*L1:* 16 *L2:* 16.5
Mandatory education prior to applying	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	*L1+L2*: No
Eyesight test	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	*L1*: Yes *L2*: No
Road law knowledge test	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	*L1*: Yes *L2*: No
Practical test	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	*L1*: No *L2*: Yes
Minimum holding period in months	6	12	6	12	6**	6	12	*L1*: 6 *L2*: 6
Display *L*-plates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	*L1+L2*: Yes
Mandatory education and instruction	No	No	No	No	No; Yes if CBTA	No	No	*L1+L2*: No
Mandatory minimum driving hours	No	120 (20 at night)	No	100 (10 at night)	50*** (10 at night)	50	120 (10 at night)	*L1:* No *L2:* 25
Supervisory driver minimum requirements	Full licence	Full licence, <0.02% BAC	Full licence	Full licence 1 year same class; <0.05% BAC	Full licence 2 years without suspension	Full licence 2 years violation free	Full licence; <0.05% BAC	*L1+L2*: 4 years same licence class
BAC limit (g/100ml)	<0.02%	Zero	Zero	Zero	Zero	Zero	Zero	*L1+L2*: Zero
Maximum speed restriction	No	80 km/h	80 km/h	No	80 km/h; 100 if prof. instruction	80 km/h	No	*L1+L2*: 100 km/h
Mobile phone restriction – all use	No	No	Yes	Yes	No****	No	Yes	No
Towing restriction	750kg GVM	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	*L1+L2*: No
Reduced demerit point threshold	No	No	5 points in 12 months	No	4 points in 12 months	4 points in 12 months	5 points in 12 months	No

Note: CBTA = Competency Based Training and Assessment; L1 = Learn Licence Phase 1; L2 = Learner Licence Phase 2
* It has been announced that a 12-month Learner period will apply in Tasmania from April 2009, with a minimum of 3 months on L1, requiring successful completion of a practical test to proceed to L2; L2 minimum of 9 months
** It has been announced that this will increase to 12 months in 2010
*** It has been announced that this will increase to 75 hours in 2010
**** It has been announced that this will be introduced in 2009/2010

Table 2. Provisonal Licence requirements and restrictions in Australian graduated driver licensing systems

Component	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS*	VIC	WA
Minimum age: years	17	*P1*: 17 *P2*: 18	16.5	*P1*: 17 *P2*: 18	*P1*: 16.5 *P2*: 17.5	*P1*: 17 *P2*: 18	*P1*: 18 *P2*: 19	17
Practical test	Yes; No if CBTA	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	Yes	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	*P1+P2*: Yes; No if CBTA	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	No
Hazard perception test	No	*P1*: No *P2*: Yes	No	*P1*: No *P2*: Yes	*P1*: No *P2*: Yes	*P1+P2*: No	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	Yes
Minimum period: months	36	*P1*: 12 *P2*: 24	24	*P1*: 12 *P2*: 24	*P1*: 12** *P2*: 6*** *P1+P2* total: longest of age 19 or 24 mo	*P1*: 12 *P2*: 24	*P1*: 12 *P2*: 36	24
Display *P*-plates	Yes; No if CBTA at 6 mo	*P1+P2*: Yes	Yes	*P1+P2*: Yes	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	*P1+P2*: Yes	*P1+P2*: Yes	Yes
BAC limit (g/100ml)	<0.02%	*P1+P2*: Zero	Zero	*P1+P2*: Zero	*P1+P2*: Zero	*P1+P2*: Zero	*P1+P2*: Zero	Zero
Maximum speed restriction	No	*P1*: 90 km/h *P2*: 100 km/h	100 km/h	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: 100 km/h	*P1*: 80 km/h *P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	110 km/h
Automatic transmission restriction	No	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	Yes	*P1+P2*: Yes	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	Yes	No
Mandatory education & instruction	No; Yes if CBTA	*P1+P2*: No	No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	No
Night-time or passenger restriction	No	*P1*: 1 passenger <age 21 from 11pm to 5am *P2*: No	No	*P1*: 1 passenger <age 21 from 11pm to 5am *P2*: No	If demerit point, regress stage + 12-5am 1 year	*P1+P2*: No	*P1*: 1 passenger age 16-21 *P2*: No	12-5am first 6 months
Mobile phone restriction – all use	No	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	No	*P1+P2*: Yes	No****	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: Yes	No
High-powered vehicle restriction	No	*P1+P2*: Yes	No	*P1+P2*: Yes	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: Yes	No
Towing restriction	750kg GVM	*P1*: 250 kg *P2*: No	No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1*: Yes *P2*: No	No
Demerit point threshold	4 points; 8 if complete CBTA at 6 months	*P1*: 4 points *P2*: 7 points	5 points in 12 months	4 points in 12 months	*P1*: 1 point mandatory education + 12 mo points-free *P2*: 4 points	4 points in 12 months	*P1+P2*: 5 points in 12 months	No (but no good behaviour option)
Exit test	No	*P1*: No *P2*: Yes	No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	*P1+P2*: No	No
Minimum age for full licence: years	20	20	18.5	20	19; 20 if demerits	20	22	19

Note: CBTA = Competency Based Training and Assessment; P1 = Provisional Phase 1; P2 = Provisional Phase 2

NSW and SA, introduced a hazard perception test to progress from the first to second provisional phase, while in VIC and WA these tests must be passed prior to provisional licensure. The practical driving test to progress from the learner to provisional period was also revised considerably in both NSW and VIC. Restrictions from all mobile phone use, including hands-free use, were introduced for both learners and provisional drivers and nighttime driving and passenger restrictions were introduced in various forms in several jurisdictions. High-powered vehicle restrictions were also introduced in two additional states after being a long-term feature of Victoria's GDL. A good behaviour record is also required to progress from the first to second provisional stage in VIC, and changes to the minimum provisional period duration result in a significant increase in the minimum full licence age in that state: 22 years – one of the highest known ages internationally (Senserrick & Whelan, 2003).

Several changes to sanctions for traffic offences/excess demerit points have also been implemented that are not fully reviewed here, but include a licence suspension ("zero tolerance") for any first-year provisional speeding offence in NSW, a mandatory alcohol interlock for six months when returning from suspension for an alcohol offence with a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of .07 or higher in Victoria, and various nighttime driving or passenger restrictions when returning after suspension in several states.

The most commonly applied changes are now explored in further detail, including consideration of their likely effectiveness in reducing young driver crashes and other potential concerns.

Increased Learner Period and Supervised Driving Requirements

QLD now requires 100 hours of supervised practice driving during the learner period and NSW and VIC require 120 hours (with both QLD and VIC specifying that 10 hours must be logged at night). All three states have accordingly extended their minimum learner periods from the most common minimum of six months to 12 months.

Several studies have demonstrated benefits of extending the learner period. A review of 15 Northern American evaluations found crash reductions ranging from 5% to 32% per capita, with a 12-month learner period associated with a reduced crash risk of 31% per licensee and 16% per driver in one jurisdiction and a 27% per capita reduction in another (McKnight & Peck, 2002). In Sweden, an extension of the learner period from 6 months to 2 years, while retaining the minimum mandatory minimum of 6 months was associated with a 40% reduced crash risk for those utilising the full 2 years compared to previous cohorts, and a 24% reduced crash risk compared to those meeting only the 6 month minimum requirement (Gregersen et al, 2000). The overall net reduction in crashes was 15%.

Research on the benefits of extensive mandatory supervised driving hours is less clear. In the abovementioned Swedish study, those utilising the full two-year learner period (and achieving significant crash reductions) on average recorded 118 hours of supervised practice compared to an average of 48 hours for those utilising the six-month minimum only (Gregersen, 1997). The rounded figure of 120 hours was, therefore, only the average number of practice hours achieved and was not directly tested (no minimum hours were mandated). In Europe minimum supervised mileage rather than hours has been mandated at 3,000 kilometres in some jurisdictions, with a crash reduction benefit found in Austria but not in France (Page et al, 2004; Twisk & Stacey, 2007). Therefore, the findings regarding crash reduction benefits of this measure are inconsistent.

There are, however, other benefits of extensive supervised practice, including driving: at a wider variety of times of day, including substantial more driving in darkness; on a wider variety of road types; at a wider variety of speeds; for a wider variety of trip durations; and in unusually inclement weather (Groeger & Brady, 2004). Further, requiring extensive minimum hours can extend the learner period for drivers who might otherwise rush through this period and thereby indirectly benefit drivers by longer learner periods and older age at provisional licensing (Maycock et al, 1991; Mayhew et al, 2003; Twisk & Stacey, 2007).

Conversely, there are practical aspects of these requirements that disadvantage certain youth. Licensing support programs in remote areas include short-term visits to communities, where learners can be taken through intensive training and testing to allow them to meet provisional licensing requirements. These programs can be limited when longer minimum learner periods are mandated resulting in difficulties relocating learner applicants at a 12-month follow up. Some young people also have limited access to practice vehicles and/or to appropriately qualified supervisory drivers in order to achieve extensive practice hours. This can be an issue in small, isolated communities, but also in more populous areas where families only have a work vehicle available that a young driver is ineligible to drive, for example, or in families that have more than one learner requiring practice at the same time. Therefore, consideration must also be given to implementing appropriate alternatives and support programs in conjunction with such requirements to ensure certain youth or communities are not inadvertently and disproportionately disadvantaged.

Hazard Perception Tests

Hazard perception tests are now required to progress from the first to second learner phase in WA, from learner to provisional licence in VIC, and from the first to second provisional phase in NSW, QLD and SA.

Poor hazard perception skills have long been identified as poorly-developed in young drivers relative to older, more experienced drivers (Brown & Groeger, 1988; Mourant & Rockwell, 1972) and are associated with higher crash risk (Horswill & McKenna, 2004). There have, however, been few published evaluations of validity or reliability of licensing-based hazard perception tests, or of their utility in predicting crash risk. Evaluation and psychometric assessment of Victoria's hazard perception test, lead to a revision and a reported increased reliability (Catchpole, Congdon & Leadbeatter, 2001; Congdon, 1999). However, the validity of these tests to be able to identify at-risk drivers is yet to be established (Palamara, 2005).

Hands-Free Mobile Phone Restrictions

Restrictions from all mobile phone use, that is, including hands-free use, now apply to learner drivers and to provisional drivers for at least 12 months in NSW, QLD and VIC.

Research has clearly shown the detriment of mobile phone use, including hands-free use, on driving performance, including slower reaction times and variable speeds and following distances (McEvoy et al, 2006; Patten et al, 2004; Strayer & Drews, 2004). This impacts further with inexperience, with studies demonstrating that, compared to more experienced drivers, novices are more likely not to stop at intersections (Olsen, 2005) and to glance more often at their phone, including significantly longer glances, causing them to wander in their lane (Wikman et al, 1998).

While Australian GDL restrictions on hands-free phone use are too new to have been evaluated, one recent evaluation in a North American jurisdiction (North Carolina) found limited benefit when the restriction was not actively marketed or enforced (Foss et al, 2008).

High-Powered Vehicle Restrictions

High-powered vehicle restrictions have long been in place in VIC and have now been introduced in NSW and QLD. However, there has been no readily identifiable published research to support the restriction. A crash-based evaluation in WA found no association between a high power-to-weight ratio vehicle and increased risk of an injury crash for young, novice drivers (Palamara & Gavin, 2005). The authors recommended that alternative measures should be implemented to combat the speeding behaviour associated with these vehicles.

In addition, the authors cautioned that such a restriction may lead novices to drive less safe vehicles given that high-powered vehicles are among those with the highest occupant protection ratings. Discouraging use may have unintended consequences when a young driver is unable to drive the family vehicle, for example, and instead is given an older/smaller vehicle with less occupant protection (Cammisa et al 1999; Williams et al, 2006). Research also shows that young drivers with access to their own vehicle, as opposed to a shared family vehicle, are more likely to take driving risks and have a higher crash risk, including after adjusting for driving exposure (Senserrick et al, 2007). Further evaluation is warranted to determine any potential crash fatality or injury reduction benefits, as well as any unintended consequences that may negate any such benefits.

Night-time and passenger restrictions for early provisional period

WA is the only state to have introduced a night-time driving restriction (between 12 to 5am), applying to provisional drivers for the first six months; with exemptions for work and education purposes. VIC is the only state to have introduced a peer passenger restriction that operates all day – one passenger aged 16 to 21 years – which applies to the first-year provisional licence. In contrast, NSW and QLD restrict first-year provisional drivers to one passenger aged under 21 from 11pm to 5am only; with exemptions for immediate family members, and in NSW also for work or emergency purposes. Other restrictions such as these only operate in other states on return from a licence suspension.

Driving at night and driving with peer passengers or multiple passengers represent significantly inflated risks to young, novice drivers (Keall et al, 2004; VicRoads, 2005; Williams, 2003). Restrictions on these are among the most effective components of GDL systems in New Zealand and North America, where they have been implemented since the 1990s (Senserrick & Whelan, 2003; Stevenson, 2005). National evaluations in the United States clearly demonstrate that states that include these GDL components achieve substantially higher reductions in fatalities and injuries (Baker at al, 2006, 2007).

The risk to young Australian novices driving at night and driving while carrying multiple passengers has also been clearly demonstrated (ATSB, 2007; RTA, 2004; VicRoads, 2005). There is considerable room to strengthen and extend these restrictions, particularly given that these driving conditions represent only a small proportion of actually driving time. For example, Victorian novices spend only 9% of their total driving hours driving between 10pm to 6am and also 9% of time carrying passengers, yet one-third of their fatal crashes occur during these nighttime hours and over one-quarter occur when carrying multiple passengers (VicRoads, 2005). While other requirements may disadvantage certain youth from achieving licensure, these restrictions have no such affects and have considerable implications for fatality and injury reductions. All young and novice drivers should be encouraged to continue to use the same alternatives they had in place prior to their provisional licensure or have a supervisory driver present to continue the learning process during these high risk conditions for at least another six if not 12 months.

Concluding Comments

Overall, while there is still room for improvement, several changes are becoming common in Australian graduated driver licensing systems that will likely lead to crash reductions for young drivers, particularly with continued evaluation and refinement. These include longer learner periods, increased supervised driving hours (with additional support programs), mobile phone restrictions (with visible marketing and enforcement), and night-time and passenger restrictions for early provisional drivers.

While a high value must be placed on crash reductions, there is also a need to consider potential unintended consequences of some of the changes implemented. Some young people have limited access to vehicles and/or supervisory drivers in order to meet extensive practice requirements. Licensing support programs operating in remote areas can be limited when long minimum learner periods are mandated resulting in difficulties relocating learner applicants at follow up. High-powered vehicle restrictions may result in some provisional drivers accessing less safe vehicles rather than a shared family high-powered vehicle. Further consideration is needed of exemptions or alternatives to certain requirements and restrictions and of appropriate support programs to be developed and implemented, such as programs that provide vehicles and supervisory drivers for those with limited access. While population-based evaluations and regulations are justified to combat the over-representation of young drivers in road trauma, care must be taken not to inadvertently disadvantage certain sectors of the community, particularly disadvantaged youth.

Correspondence to:

Dr Teresa Senserrick, Deputy Director, Injury Division

The George Institute for International Health, PO Box M201, Missenden Road

NSW 2050 AUSTRALIA Phone: +61 2 9657 0300 Fax: +61 2 9657 0301

Email: tsenserrick@george.org.au

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So, the Crash Rate's Down, Where to from Here?

by Jeff McDougall President Australian Driver Trainers Association NSW; email: jeffmcdougall@bigpond.com

Introduction

The last two years have seen some massive changes to young driver licensing and licence conditions, not only in New South Wales, but in all Australian jurisdictions. This article concentrates on the changes and initiatives that have occurred in New South Wales in 2007 and 2008 and has some suggestions as to where young driver safety should progress from here.

Perhaps the most significant change in New South Wales has been the major change to the driving test, initially rolled out in the country areas and finally introduced in the Sydney Metropolitan area in December 2007. As the test has the potential to dictate whatever training and education is obtained by new drivers, it was always going to have the ability to change where the emphasis on road safety should be placed. An analysis of the crash statistics in New South Wales (Roads and Traffic Authority) shows that young driver crashes fall into five main categories and the test was designed to concentrate on the ways to avoid these five main crash types.

Other changes introduced in July 2007 may have had some effect on the crash rate for young drivers in a period when the death rate for crashes in all age groups has been the lowest for many years.

As well as these jurisdictional changes, there are a number of other programs on road safety for young people including the RYDA Program run by Rotary, the Youth and Road Trauma Forum run by the NRMA and Westmead Hospital, U-Turn the Wheel run by Rotary in the Sutherland Shire, "The Power of Choice" in the Port Macquarie area, Reduce Risk Increase Student Knowledge (RRisk) in the North Coast area, other School based programs run by the RTA and concerned community groups that all have the potential to reach huge numbers of young people. There are also programs for parents conducted by Road Safety Officers and Driving Instructors and a concerted effort to form partnerships between Parents and Driving Instructors to get the best results for the learner driver (see Staysafe Committee, 2008).

While there has been some research done on many of these programs, some of which has claimed that the program has little if any effect on road safety (e.g., Elkington, 2005,; Redshaw, 2005), the fact is that there are many programs and clearly the community wants to have them in place. Perhaps the time has come to simplify the road safety message and to bring it back to those five major crash types. Then try to get the community programs to concentrate on the same messages that can be visited at various stages throughout the graduated licensing period, but more particularly in the learner licence period, then finally assessed in a driving test that can provide the incentive to learn crash avoidance properly.

The Driving Test

The new driving test, introduced in New South Wales by the end of 2007, represented a major shift in the whole concept of young driver assessment away from the traditional control use and manoeuvring skills based test to an assessment of five key areas (Roads and Traffic Authority, 2007). They are Speed Management, Road Positioning, Decision Making, Responding to Hazards and Vehicle Control. As previously mentioned, these five key areas are based on the five major crash types for young drivers that are as follows, along with their percentage representation of all young driver crashes (see Figure 1).

The fact that these five major crash types add up to 90% of all crashes was a major factor in determining the way in which the new driving test had to be structured.