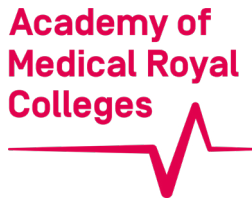May 2022

Academy of Medical Royal Colleges

Academic dishonesty
Additional guidance for online examinations

Introduction

Disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to colleges and faculties making significant changes to the way that they delivered examinations. Across specialties both knowledge-based and clinical/practical examinations have been moved to virtual and remote formats.

While this move has been broadly welcomed in facilitating access and continuing delivery to support trainee career progression, it has also posed new challenges for those responsible for maintaining the integrity and security of examinations. Allowing candidates to sit examinations in their own environments is of particular concern; however, mitigations can be put in place to reduce risks. This document is an addition to the existing Academy guidance on dealing with academic dishonesty in high-stakes examinations to address some of these new issues.

Risks and mitigations

As with other forms of examinations, one of the first steps is communication to candidates about what they can expect when sitting an examination (introductory videos are a useful tool in this respect). Robust and accessible regulations should be created that outline expected standards of conduct; these do not need to differ significantly from previous versions developed for other delivery formats. Providers of online examination services have extensive experience of how to address the most common risks.

Moving away from a traditional environment to one that is less formal may lead some candidates to behave differently during the examination; using live proctors or constant technological monitoring and interrupting candidates if they are believed to be breaching regulations can prove an effective mitigation against all of the risks outlined below.

Colleges and faculties should develop post-examination quality assurance processes. Evaluation of examination proctor reports to identify candidates who have been flagged as amber or red, accompanied with more in-depth review of webcam and screenshare videos to identify potential cases of misconduct, can be effective tools in developing policies. Contacting candidates to remind them to abide by regulations for future attempts if they are found to have committed minor breaches (e.g. forgetting to remove headphones) demonstrates that monitoring is in place and can discourage more serious instances of dishonesty.

A range of potential risks is outlined below, along with some solutions that can be put in place to mitigate against these.

Risk	Mitigation
Content harvesting (copying or theft of examination questions or scenarios)	Requiring candidates to enable screenshare functions allows remote proctors to monitor any attempts to copy or take screenshots of questions. Live chat functions can be utilised to remind candidates in real-time that this is not permitted. Pre-examination environment scans can be used to identify hidden cameras. Lockdown browser functions can prevent candidates from using other software during examinations, but this can be difficult to implement in a remote system. Candidates should destroy any scrap paper used during the examination when they finish and demonstrate to the proctor that this has been done. Proctors should record any instances of reading questions aloud.
Unauthorised use of technology	Regulations should emphasise that candidates are not permitted to use, or have on their desk, any technology that can be used for communication, storing information, or accessing the internet (e.g. phones or smartwatches). To avoid any confusion, advise candidates that they must remove any type of watch they are wearing before the examination starts. Explain to candidates that phones can only be used to contact institutions in the event of technical failure. Candidates should declare to their institution during application if they have to use devices for boosting internet signals and should show this to proctors at the start of the examination. Candidates should only be permitted to use one screen, as it is not possible to monitor all of what is being displayed on the second screen. Regulations should make clear that looking away or down may indicate that a candidate is using another device and may lead to interruption from a proctor. This should be recorded by proctors if they regard it as suspicious.

Risk	Mitigation
Unauthorised use of technology (continued)	During room scans, candidates should be asked to explain any devices or cables, and to move these away from desks. Monitoring in addition to the webcam and screenshare, e.g. through an app, can identify whether candidates are using unauthorised technology.
Accessing unauthorised software or materials	Regulations should make clear that candidates are only permitted to access programmes or applications required for sitting the examination; everything else should be closed. Access to email is only authorised to contact an institution in the event of technical failure. Use of screenshare functions can demonstrate whether candidates are attempting to access other websites or programmes. Institutions should decide whether candidates are permitted to use scrap paper during the examination to take notes. If allowed, this should be shown to the proctor at the start of the examination to confirm that it is blank. Candidates should be reminded that they are not permitted to have any books, notes or any other study materials on their desk while sitting the examination.
Other people present in the examination environment	Candidates should be reminded to sit the examination in a quiet environment where they are less likely to be disturbed. Room scans should cover the whole examination environment and must show that there are no other people present. Proctors should record: — If any other people come into the candidate's examination environment at any stage, regardless of how brief. Room scans should be repeated if there are any interruptions. — Any instances where candidates are reading questions aloud.

Risk	Mitigation
Candidate breaks/ technological interruptions	Candidates should be permitted to take breaks when sitting as not doing so represents a significant reputational risk. Candidates should indicate to proctors that they are taking a break and the start and end times should be recorded. Regulations should make clear that taking frequent or longer breaks (e.g. > 5 minutes) will be recorded and may result in further investigation of the candidate performance. Candidates who may require longer or more frequent breaks for medical reasons should indicate this to their institution when applying. Consider breaking papers up into shorter sections or allow candidates to log out if they have finished within the allotted time, to reduce the need to take breaks. Webcam and screenshare functions should not be deliberately switched off at any time during an examination; doing so should be treated as an act of misconduct. Explain to candidates that loss of these functions raises concerns about security and that if they are disrupted for a significant amount of time (e.g. > 5 minutes) without attempt to contact proctors to resolve the issue their results will be reviewed and may be declared void by examining boards.
Impersonation (candidates allowing someone else to sit the examination in their place)	Continue with the robust policies used to identify candidates in pencil and paper examinations. Require candidates to show valid ID documents at the start of examination papers. Proctors should flag any cases where ID cannot be seen properly, and these should be followed up after the examination by the institution where required. If there are significant doubts about a candidate's identity, allow the examination to be paused until this can be verified. Ensure candidates that discretion will be exercised where required in identification processes (e.g. allocating female proctors).

Example list of violations (from MRCP(UK) regulations)

Providers of examination delivery platforms will often ask institutions to provide a list of regulation breaches (or 'violations') that will be flagged by proctors during the examination. These should be included in regulations, and it should be explained to candidates that they may be interrupted by proctors if it is felt that the rules are being violated in any way.

The following list is taken from paragraph 4.6(a) (ii) of the MRCP(UK) Regulations, and was developed after discussion with their provider:

"To prevent academic misconduct during online examinations, and to ensure that they are not interrupted by proctors, candidates are NOT permitted to:

— *Look at a mobile phone, tablet, or any other device capable of communication or storing information. All such devices must be removed from the examination environment prior to starting, and this must be confirmed with the invigilator during initial checks. Candidates can use mobile phones if they need to contact MRCP(UK) in the event of encountering technical difficulties during the examination.*

— *Wear any of the following items (this will be checked during the registration process):*

  — *earplugs or headphones*

  — *any clothing that can be used to hide materials, i.e. hooded jumper. Items worn for religious purposes are permitted and discretion will be exercised in conducting ID checks*

  — *Sunglasses (unless permitted for medical reasons) or smart glasses*

  — *Watches (including smartwatches)*

— *Switch off their webcam or screenshare feed.*

— *Access any web pages other than the ones required for sitting the examination. Any other web pages that candidates have open before starting the examination should be closed. Candidates can access email accounts if they need to contact MRCP(UK) in the event of encountering technical difficulties during the examination.*

— *Access other applications on their computer*

— *Take screenshots of or copy examination content*

— *Talk to anyone outside the room or attempt to communicate with anyone else sitting the examination using phones or email.*

— *Use multiple screens*

— *Use a calculator*

— *Have textbooks or notes in the examination environment (blank paper is permitted)*

— *Sit in a room that is too dark*

— *Angle their laptop or camera upwards or have their face obscured*

— *Vape or smoke."*

Case studies

Several colleges and faculties have recorded cases of academic dishonesty by candidates sitting online examinations. Some examples are included below as cases studies, including the resolution of the issue and lessons for the future.

Case	Resolution	Lessons for the future
Unauthorised software		
Candidate was flagged by the proctor for copying content from a question into Google to find answers.	Breach of regulations was confirmed during post-examination review and misconduct proceedings were initiated. Candidate initially denied allegation until informed that there was video evidence. Candidate barred from sitting for four diets and referred to the regulator.	Develop communications explaining to candidates what is permitted and that their conduct during examinations is being monitored by invigilators and through webcam/screenshare functions. Emphasise that this may be used to investigate allegations of misconduct.
Content harvesting		
Candidate was flagged by the proctor for taking a screenshot of a question.	Breach of regulations was confirmed during post-examination review and misconduct proceedings were initiated. During investigation, candidate indicated that they had taken screenshots of three questions; full review of the screenshare showed that the candidate had taken screenshots of 25 questions. Candidate barred from sitting for eight diets and referred to the regulator.	Communicate through various channels [email/website/social media] to remind candidates that copying examination content is not permitted. Empower invigilators to interrupt candidates during an examination if they detect this.

Case	Resolution	Lessons for the future
Content harvesting (continued)		
Candidates writing detailed notes after each question.		Prevent candidates from using paper during examination or require this to be destroyed before submitting answers.
Use of unauthorised devices or materials		
Candidates observed: — Using phones or tablets — Connecting laptops to secondary devices (e.g. monitors or using HDMI splitters)	Candidates investigated under misconduct regulations and referred to regulator if allegation admitted or found proven.	Work with providers to ensure that invigilators conduct thorough room scans prior to examination starting, and that anything unauthorised is removed from examination environment Remind candidates to familiarise themselves with regulations prior to sitting. Consider returning delivery of examinations to centres where greater invigilation possible.
Interaction with proctors		
Candidates made claims that proctors had interrupted them during examination.	Review of examination footage showed these claims to be false.	Develop communications explaining to candidates what is permitted and that their conduct during examinations is being monitored by invigilators and through webcam/screenshare functions. Emphasise that this may be used to investigate allegations of misconduct.

Case	Resolution	Lessons for the future
Use of unauthorised devices or materials		
Candidates using closed social media channels (e.g. WhatsApp or Telegram) to share live examination content.	Any candidates identified have results voided, and are disbarred from sitting examinations or sent written warnings.	Run examinations in centres. Encourage candidates to inform colleges if they are aware of groups where content is shared.

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