



The cost of medical postgraduate training examinations: The pressures, challenges and possible remedies

Summary

The Academy Trainee Doctors' Group (ATDG) represents trainees in postgraduate training. The ATDG comprises over 60 representatives from across the different medical royal colleges and faculties, all of which are at different stages of their respective training pathways. We are continually looking to improve the support given to doctors in training throughout their postgraduate education and work. We work collaboratively to identify particular issues and challenges, and strive to implement improvements across the whole NHS to enhance training, recruitment and retention of this crucial component of the workforce.

Specialty training presents significant financial pressures for trainees in terms of financing study materials, training and revision courses, and examination fees. Examination fees in particular have been a perennial issue for doctors in training and with the UK in the midst of a cost of living crisis several trainees report that they are unable to undertake these exams due to financial pressures, inhibiting their progression. The number of trainees impacted by this is likely to increase, even after the cost of living crisis is over. Neither the Academy nor the ATDG has a remit to cover pay and terms and conditions issues. However, these obviously have an effect on trainees. If the value of pay continues to erode, it will also have an impact on the affordability of examinations.

Currently, colleges and faculties do not receive any financial support for the delivery of their postgraduate examinations and therefore the costs are met by doctors in training. These are high-stakes examinations and require considerable resource to deliver to the expected standard. Colleges and faculties work to minimise the rise in examination fees but this is becoming more difficult, and any increases in cost will be directly transferred to the fees paid by doctors in training.

The ATDG have been exploring options for changing the way examinations are funded. A set of questions were developed to help guide this work and provide valuable specialty-specific perspectives which could be used by colleges and other stakeholders to construct a realistic proposal that will be applicable to all specialties.

Key findings

- The number and interval of examination sittings is variable across the different medical specialties. However, passing all of these examinations is a mandatory requirement for training progression and completion.
- The majority of colleges and faculties do not provide information to doctors in training about how examination fees are spent. All trainee respondents felt that this would be useful information for the trainee network to access across their specialties.
- The respondents stated that the examination fees varied from £330 - £1,904 per examination part. These fees also increase for international applicants across some specialties.
- The fee structure for all subsequent attempts/re-sits remains the same for all specialty respondents; no discounted rates are provided.
- Colleges and faculties do not currently provide any financial support for doctors in training to make it easier for them to meet the costs of their examinations/assessments, including the ability to pay by instalments. The feasibility of paying by instalments has been explored by some colleges but there are complexities and logistical challenges.
- If yearly college or faculty subscription fees were to increase [with this increase used to cover the fees/a proportion of the fees of postgraduate examinations throughout training], the majority of respondents felt that this would not be the best solution due to several equality, diversity and inclusion issues.
- The ability to access and use the study budget flexibly by individual trainees, with the option of using some of the study budget to cover the cost of examination fees, was broadly welcomed, with the recognition that the study budget per trainee would need to increase, including within the devolved nations. Trainees also recognised that a review/evaluation of the items that the study budget can cover is needed, with the potential forfeiture of non-mandatory courses, including particular revision courses.
- If the first attempts of the examinations across specialties were to be funded, this would be broadly welcomed by postgraduate doctors in training. However, the provision of this funding should not compromise any other aspects of the training pathway.
- When discussing new models of examination funding, consideration should be given to the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion. This includes the impact on trainees working less than full-time (LTFT) and international medical graduates (IMG). Fairness and equality in relation to trainees in the four devolved nations should also be considered.

Recommendations for consideration

- Colleges and faculties should work to promote their transparency regarding exam fee spending.
- Colleges and faculties should regularly review their examinations and associated processes, including an assessment of cost effectiveness.
- Governments, statutory education bodies, or other relevant organisations to consider paying the examination fee for the first attempt of each examination in the postgraduate medical specialty training pathway across specialties.
- Stakeholders to explore the use of the trainee study budget to fund examination fees.
- Stakeholders to explore improving the logistical aspects of exam fee payments.
- Any changes should be reviewed in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion principles.