



Principles for exam preparation, feedback and support for candidates to address the awarding gap

There should be support for all candidates in advance of any exam attempt. This needs to be inclusive. Candidate populations may include those whose undergraduate degree was outside the UK and maybe less familiar with UK assessments and how to access support.

Colleges and faculties should aim to reach all candidates by the use of online information and consider portals for candidates to pose questions on exam technique. Colleges and faculties should encourage candidates to access these resources.

The overarching aim is for candidates to prepare thoroughly to ensure they are ready to sit the exam.

In the case of an exam fail, candidates should be encouraged to access help, reflect on feedback, and involve a mentor, educational supervisor, senior trainee or examiner to improve on areas of weakness.

Colleges and faculties may wish to consider involving their education and training department to further these principles, and to avoid any threat to the integrity of the exam.

Principle 1. Generic support

Published accessible support and guidance for all candidates could include:

- Guidance on exam technique and marking schemes
- Explanation of standard setting and how to score marks
- Familiarisation with the test environment and structure
- Exemplar materials such as sample papers or videos of candidates taking stations, both doing well and making errors
- Sign posting to exam reports, which may contain standard setting, information on different cohorts and subject domains
- Videos or interviews with examiners or senior trainees providing tips and advice on what to expect on the day
- Webinars with examiners with an opportunity for Q&A
- Provision of information on the performance of different cohorts
- Orientation with exam formats, particularly online assessment platforms
- Information on applying for reasonable adjustments and the notification period required.

Principle 2. Exam specific support

Published guidance for specific exams to help candidates prepare [this is particularly relevant in face-to-face exams or practical exams] could include:

- Clear guidance on the amount of time available for tasks or what single aspect of clinical practice the task is focusing on e.g. history taking, or managing the patient, not the sign
- An explanation of what is different between the simulated exam situation and real-life day to day practice.
- Advice on what the question format will be
- Advice on what the examiners are looking for, how they are likely to phrase the questions, and how to score marks
- Reinforce the fact that a fail is not automatic if a wrong answer is given
- Advice on facing a clinical situation they have not previously encountered.

Principle 3. Targeted support

Some candidates may be at high risk of exam failure — a variety of provisions and interventions can be used to help support these candidates.

- Practice OSCEs as part of workplace based assessments
- Online resources for exams
- Face-to-face examination preparation courses
- Regional teaching on exam techniques
- Sharing reflections from senior trainees who have passed (or failed but have reflected and learnt) with respect to aspects of the exam environment that may differ from clinical practice.

Principle 4. Feedback and support after an exam attempt

Feedback provided on a candidate's performance in an exam attempt should meet the minimum standards outlined in the Academy [Guidance in standards for candidate feedback: summative postgraduate medical exams in the UK](#).

- Feedback on areas of strength and weakness against the standard with the intention of improving a trainee's performance either at subsequent attempts or in real-life clinical practice
- Personalised feedback including verbal descriptors where feasible
- Domain performance and relative performance compared to other candidates
- Candidates should be encouraged to go through feedback in detail and discuss it with Clinical/Educational supervisor, examiner, mentor, or senior trainee
- Consider giving more detailed feedback than the minimum standards for trainees with additional educational needs or who are from known disadvantaged groups.

Principle 5. Trainer involvement

Guidance on feedback should also target trainers and support them to provide or access effective training locally and adjust training programmes in response to feedback around exam fails.

- Trainers are a critical source of support to prepare for exams and recover from exam fails. They can provide counselling, mentorship and remediation
- Colleges and faculties should encourage candidates to update trainers by sharing overarching feedback from exams, updating e-Portfolios with the number of exam attempts and candidate feedback, and providing accessible guidance on exams
- Local training can be adjusted in response to feedback to concentrate on identified areas of weakness
- Signposting to support should be accessible within postgraduate training organisations after one exam fail including screening for neurodiverse conditions
- Trainers should be aware of planned exam attempts for their trainees, feedback from failed attempts and common reasons for failure for different cohorts
- Trainers should be aware of the number of exam attempts permitted and how many their trainee has sat.

Principle 6. Policy on targeted support

The criteria for offering enhanced, targeted support to a group of candidates should be documented in a policy.

- Initiatives should be offered on the basis of objective judgements on individual performance rather than using demographic characteristics such as ethnicity
- Where possible, criteria based on evidence of individuals' educational needs are preferred and policies should take account of the evidence that initiatives have on any attainment gap
- Use of GMC data portals could be considered to identify a group to target and provide a target outcome
- Organisations carrying out public functions have a duty to advance equality of opportunity between those who share protected characteristics and those who do not. Providing targeted support to certain cohorts may help comply with this duty
- Colleges and faculties may elect a lead person (or persons) to coordinate the policy and apply the principles described. This may also require a separate budget.

Principle 7. Exam design

The programme of support and feedback for candidates should not interfere with the primary aim of the assessment which is to maintain the standard of practice.

- Programmes of assessment should ensure the integrity of the assessment and mitigate any risk that trainees without the required knowledge and skills pass exams
- Support provided to all candidates, or targeted at specific cohorts, should not undermine the integrity of the assessment
- Good exam design includes testing time, number of items, sampling strategy, standard setting, alignment to curriculum learning outcomes and integration with other assessment within the programme of assessment
- Exam design should be evaluated and regularly monitored to identify and remove disadvantages to specific cohorts for example:
 - Reviewing the language and scenarios to identify and remove unnecessary cultural bias
 - The use of differential item functioning to identify and remove potential bias.

Principle 8. Conflicts of interest

Colleges and faculties will need to manage the conflict of interest between assessing candidate performance against standards and supporting all candidates to prepare effectively for exams including targeted support where appropriate.

- Exam boards must balance the need to assess the performance of candidates in a robust and reliable way against ensuring candidates have a fair opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities. Ways of managing this conflict might be:
 - Creating bespoke stations for prep courses which are separate to live exam questions banks
 - Commissioning clinical leads (experienced examiners) within the external training and events departments to deliver targeted interventions rather than using the exam department
 - Ensuring clear and objective criteria for inviting candidates and allocating places
 - Creating materials or courses to be delivered online or by Deaneries/Local Education Providers/more senior trainees.

Principle 9. Collaboration

There are opportunities for colleges and faculties to collaborate on guidance, projects, cost savings and success stories.

- Projects do not need to be specialty/exam specific. There may be a way of partnering with other postgraduate training organisations with shared goals to improve outcomes for trainees
- It may be reasonable for candidates to cover some of the cost to access targeted support where this would not further increase inequalities
- Colleges and faculties should evaluate any formative support developed and share findings with the wider community to build an understanding of what is effective for different cohorts.