

Currency, Timing and Number of Attempts at professional examinations

Introduction

In April 2011, the GMC asked the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges (AoMRC) to reach a consensus on national professional examinations relating to the currency, timing and number of attempts at the examinations with medical Royal Colleges, Postgraduate Deaneries, trainees, patients and the public and representatives of the NHS.

In November 2011, the AoMRC, through its Assessment Committee, proposed an approach to national professional examinations, setting out a backstop position on the currency and number of attempts and the GMC's Postgraduate Board agreed to this way forward.

This paper sets out: what the new requirements are; details on issues relating to application of these requirements, flexibility and where in the process the limits will apply; timescale for implementation; and a checklist to inform a plan for implementation of the proposals.

1. An overview of the new requirements

The new GMC regulatory changes are parameters to work within (i.e. not exceed) but are not prescriptive. Individual Colleges can/may opt to be stricter in their rulings regarding duration of validity or number of attempts permitted if they wish.

The changes are regulatory and apply to the exams so the regulations will change for all applicants (i.e. both UK and international trainees / medics and non-medics).

Validity of Exam Passes

It is agreed that there should be a seven year limit on any single examination pass with the option of flexibility in individual cases subject to detailed review of circumstances.

Number of attempts permitted

No candidate will normally be allowed more than six attempts at an examination, although individual Colleges may decide to set a lower limit. It is agreed that in order to sit an examination once the limit of six has been reached (or, if appropriate, the College's lower limit) demonstration of additional educational experience will be necessary for each re-entry after six attempts.

2. Application of requirements

i. Validity of Exam Passes and the 7 year limit

- a. No candidate will normally be allowed more than six attempts at an examination, although individual Colleges may decide to set a lower limit. It is agreed that in order to sit an examination once the limit of six has been reached (or, if appropriate, the College's lower limit) demonstration of additional educational experience will be necessary for each re-entry after six attempts.
- b. So, where a qualification has multiple parts to it and is taken in sequential order, the new rules permit that once the first exam has been passed, candidates could in principle, be permitted 7 years for each respective exam part thereafter.

In theory then, where a qualification has 3 parts, and runs in sequential order, the new regulatory changes would permit a 14 year validity period in which to complete the exam.

In cases where qualifications have more than one component part and are not taken sequentially the interpretation of the rules would be likely to differ. (For example, The Federation of Royal Colleges of Physicians MRCP(UK) Exam rules currently permit candidates only 7 years in total to complete both the Part 2 Written and Part 2 Clinical Exam. The interpretation of the rules in this case would be likely to be such that the 7 year limit in which to complete both parts would remain, rather than extending this time period to 7 years per part).

Notwithstanding, the above, Colleges will however apply their own interpretation of the rules to their qualifications subject to compliance with the overarching requirements (set out in Point 3 above).

The seven years limit will be calculated from the date that a candidate passes any KBA or clinical skills exam. So, by way of note, where a College or body has only one component to its qualification, (for example, The Federation of Royal Colleges of Physicians of the UK's Specialty Certificate Examinations) from the perspective of the exam regulations, this means the new regulations will have no impact/bearing for the administration of the exams.

- c. Colleges / Faculties will retain discretion and flexibility to extend this period in exceptional circumstances in individual cases subject to a detailed review of circumstances.

ii. Limit to number of attempts permitted

- d. No candidate will normally be allowed more than six attempts at an examination, but the changes allow for additional attempts beyond 6 subject to satisfying certain requirements around additional educational input at each re-entry thereafter.
- e. The GMC require that evidence of additional educational input must come from a third party, but it is up to Colleges to make recommendations as to who this third party should be e.g. Educational Supervisor or Head of School. The GMC expect general parity and fairness in these requirements across Colleges and Faculties.
- f. Colleges will determine what sort of evidence will count in these circumstances but it will have to be relevant for all candidates including those who are not in UK training schemes.

iii. Timing Out

A candidate who fails to complete all components of a qualification (where it has multiple parts) in the timelines permitted can/may start the process again from the beginning. It is noted however that other barriers exist for re-entering training which will serve to govern this issue.

3. Implementation of new requirements and time scales

Two to three years maximum is deemed an appropriate timeframe by which all Colleges and Faculties will be able to have completed transitional arrangements, given adequate notice to trainees, and undertaken development of the new system so fully implemented by the start of 2015 at the latest.

4. Implementation Check-list for Colleges

- Establish a project and implementation plan (including communications strategy) specifying timelines for delivery and launch (likely to depend on IT development issues and requirements)
- Assess, determine and agree implications for application of regulatory changes to the respective qualifications
- Determine formal systems and processes locally, for example, what proof of educational input additional input would satisfy requirements and who will make the decisions etc.
- Agree decisions around rules (the devil in the detail) (For example, if a candidate is absent from an exam, should it register as one of their 6 attempts or not etc)
- Assess and determining transitional rules for existing candidates
- Map the changes
- Set out rules for both new and transitional candidates (applicable from implementation date)
- Determine / scope IT development requirements to support the changes in arrangements (drawing on the decisions made) and assess and organise budget / funding for doing so.
- IT development / testing
- Amendments to Regulations
- Implementation / Launch