



Faculty of Public Health

Of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom

Working to improve the public's health

Part B (OSPHE) MFPH Examination

Publishing weightings and marking thresholds.

The educational advice obtained by FPH at all stages the OSPHE development of and assurance process has been that a critical aspect of the examination is 'reliability'.

This is aided by having a small group of well trained examiners who mark objectively by referring to clear marking guidance for each question. The objectivity of marking against criteria is helped if examiners don't know the weightings – ie they don't know what effect each mark they give for each competency will have on the overall outcome. Objectivity and equal treatment on merit of each mark would be impossible if these weightings were published, as would individual examiners making judgements about overall pass/fail thresholds rather than specific performance against competencies. It would not be possible to publish weightings such that they are only revealed to candidates and not examiners.

This approach is used in many other examination processes such as the PLAB examination run by the GMC, as well as in the Part A MFPH examination, where examiners anonymously mark different sections to ensure objectivity is achieved across the entire examination..

The external evaluation carried out by Birmingham University on the OSPHE found Reliability to be extremely high. Educationalist advice has also been to keep weightings and other details of the results process confidential. Hence, changing or revising any key areas of examination process require both justification and piloting to assess such changes against current practice – and a demonstration that it was better (or certainly no worse) than current practice.

This has implications for the examination in that if the current existing and reliable system was changed, candidates may be able to argue that any new system was relatively untried and tested and subject to (as yet unevaluated) risk of bias if marking examiners were fully cognisant of question weightings.

For these reasons, the OSPHE executive has consistently supported the current system where weightings are not published. In fact it is a tenant of the examination that only the chair and vice chair of the examination, the Academic Registrar and Head of Education for the Faculty are aware of the weighting/ conversion process. Marking examiners are expected to grade candidate performance on the basis of excellent, good, adequate or average, weak and very weak, corresponding to A, B, C, D, and E respectively; as laid out in the published marking guidance. The narrative words 'pass' or 'fail' are excluded from the specific marking criteria in the question guidance to support this approach.

The required grade patterns necessary to pass the examination are already published and do not require further elaboration. What we can say to avoid unnecessary speculation is that the 'weighting' system, and the method used to score the examination performances is purely designed to address any systematic effects of a difficult or easy question rather than weightings of any specific competency over any other. Competencies themselves are weighted equally.

In summary, any changes to the current OSPHE processes would be viewed by the GMC as a "major change" to the assessment system, akin to changing how learning outcomes are assessed. The current examination and all its processes has been accepted by the GMC as satisfying all its *Standards for Curricula and Assessment Systems*. This includes the standard that the methods used for classification of performance/ competence must be transparent and in the public domain.

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On behalf of the OSPHE Part B examination executive
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