

Chair of Part A Examiners
Faculty of Public Health
4 St Andrews Place
London
NW1 4LB.

29 June 2018

Dear Professor Holland,

Part A Feedback

Thank you for the opportunity to feed back on the experiences and comments of registrars taking the Part A exam in June 2018.

I requested feedback from all registrars who sat the exam via their regional SRC representative. I was not at this sitting so the feedback is strictly as I received.

25 people responded (one response was a regional response). The comments have been collated and are reflected below.

Practicalities and organisation of the exam

It of note that every single response praised Laura Bland's communications, including her clear instructions and regular emails, in particular the good use of photographs to aid clarity.

In addition respondents said:

- the organisation and practicalities were great,
- the venue good: quiet and airy and easy to find, with nice areas to wait in and relax in between exams.
- the giant digital clock over the stage was helpful
- having 5 minutes to get your papers in order at the end was helpful.
- It was noted that the new website had been updated to provide correct information on the website regarding the exam.

However:

- The desks were small, the chairs hard, and not all the lights were working.

Invigilators

Most respondents reflected that the invigilators were professional and supportive, and managed the exams well overall.

However, a couple of responses flagged that invigilators were not consistent with managing candidates filling in their candidate number prior to the exam starting, or stopping candidates writing during the 5 minutes allocated to ordering pages. One respondent found it took a long time for an invigilator to notice when they needed more paper.

Preparation and feedback

The lack of feedback on papers is a concern and candidates re-siting the exam said it was difficult to know where they went wrong previously.

Candidates would like some improved FPH preparation resources, including model answers, noting that past papers on the website were useful, as are the accompanying examiners' comments (even though there is some inconsistency in these). It was also highlighted that the past papers and the sample 2b questions on the website did not reflect the newer style question and this could have been communicated to candidates in advance.

A number of responses noted that additional sample 2b questions were uploaded a week before the exam with comment that they should have been available further in advance.

Previous feedback from the Faculty has stated that further examples and preparation materials will be added to the website and although there have been some additional 2b sample questions, one region specifically requested information on when further preparation materials can be expected and whether they will more accurately reflect the new questions

Lack of clarity on the syllabus.

Some respondents said they were uncertain as to the core knowledge required for the exam, which led to:

- uncertainty as to depth and extent of knowledge required
- failure to revise certain areas due to an unspecific syllabus, and
- a differing understanding between those setting the exam questions and those delivering revision programmes.

Closed bank of questions

The closed bank of questions led to a great number of concerns with the potential for unfair advantage, either that:

- questions may come up again for people re-siting the exam, and / or
- questions may be shared between registrars.

Candidates mentioned that there should be greater clarity on sanctions for sharing questions and circumstances in which it might be acceptable to share questions (eg with TPD, if this is, in fact, acceptable).

Location and delivery of the exam

- Concern was raised that this is still a handwritten exam, suggestions included a viva format, or an online format.

- Permission to familiarise oneself with the calculators prior to the start of the exam was suggested.
- There should be a northern option for the exam for sustainability, cost, and equity of access reasons.
- The ability to bank individual sub-papers would help people who have strengths in some areas but not in others.
- Having to pay the full amount to only sit part of the exam is not perceived as fair or transparent.

Paper 1a and 1b

Respondents said that:

- Paper 1 was challenging and time pressured with limited chance to re-read and correct anything, but generally the questions were thought to be fair and interesting.
- Use of multiple component questions was helpful, especially in managing time, but the balance of marks seemed to be inconsistent.
- Paper 1B - overall themes of the questions were clear

Paper 2 a and b

The format of paper 2a had changed, with some of the questions being more reflective of paper 1 style questions.

One respondent said that they thought papers 2a and 2b were a better test of knowledge and understanding than papers 1a and 1b.

As in previous years candidates found paper 2 time pressured, and not reflective of real life practice. A suggestion was made to reduce the number of questions but keep the paper time to an hour and a half.

The balance of questions requiring interpretation and statistical calculations was felt to be appropriate, and the questions were interesting. Although one respondent said there were more calculations than expected given the experience reported by past candidates and another felt as though certain questions designed to deliberately trip you up.

The academic paper used for paper 2a was identified by most respondents as extremely complex and difficult to read and digest in the time allocated. It was noted that it was very clinical and may disadvantage non-medics and not reflective of the type of papers used in previous years. A suggestion was made to include specific reading time for the critical appraisal, this may mean that the word count is not then needed as the corresponding reduction in writing time would naturally limit writing time.

The addition of a new component requiring comment on 'Public Health implications' along with the expected 'Key findings, strengths and limitations' was flagged by numerous respondents as being a surprise, an additional time pressure, and had not been part of their 600 word practice techniques.

Specific question issues from both papers

There were some issues raised regarding specific questions, a number of people made the following comments:

- Q2 of 1A was identified as the type of question more likely to be seen in paper 2B
- That there were two sociology questions but no question on health economics [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- Q10 was reflected as covering a huge topic: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- Disproportionate to have an entire question dedicated to [REDACTED].
- The statistics question on paper 2 was very complex [REDACTED]
[REDACTED].

In addition, individual comments were received as follows:

- The question relating to [REDACTED] was flagged as vague
- The wording of question 3c was unclear.

As we can see from the above comments, the feedback was generally helpful and positive, with some key concerns flagged.

There are some new issues, for example: the complexity of paper 2a findings, the change of wording in the critical appraisal requirements, and the request for greater syllabus clarity.

There are also reiterations of past issues, such as time pressures, the time differential between paper 1a and 1b, the handwritten nature of the exam. These issues have all been previously discussed and in many cases have been or are in the process of being addressed, as such I will remind the next SRC meeting of previous responses and ensure that they are disseminated to registrars for reassurance.

If you have any queries about any responses, please do not hesitate to ask.

Should you wish for the SRC support in disseminating any response to this feedback, we would be happy to oblige,

yours sincerely,



Caroline Vass
Wessex deanery

On behalf of the SRC of the FPH