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Dear Dr Ward,

Re: Part A feedback

Thank you for the opportunity to feed back the experiences and comments of registrars taking the Diplomate exam in January 2020. I requested feedback from all registrars who sat the exam, via their regional SRC representatives, and in total there were 21 respondents. Their feedback was collated and is presented below.

Practicalities and organisation of the exam

As has always been the case, the logistics around the organisation and information sent out before the exam was highly praised, with Laura Bland being mentioned by name by multiple candidates. In particular, candidates appreciated being given the model of calculator they would have access to, as it allowed them to practice and understand the functions of the calculator before the exam. One candidate raised the issue that candidates were able to bring in their own timers, but they did not see this mentioned in the exam guidance.

Several candidates mentioned that having to put candidate and questions numbers on each page, and ensure their correct order, added unneeded time and stress during and at the end of the exam, and suggested the use of question booklets.

A couple of candidates mentioned that there was an extended discussion between invigilators during paper 1a, at the back of the hall, which, while they did eventually take it outside the hall, was distracting.

The exams all started on times, and many candidates mentioned having the large clock projected at the front was very useful.

One candidate had an unanticipated reasonable adjustment that they could request within 2-3 weeks of the exam, and provided evidence for this. They were told this could not be accommodated due to the policy of 6 weeks' notice being needed. The candidate felt it was required what practicalities were that would restrict their unreasonable adjustment, and felt they were simply given a rote answer.

Venue

Unsurprisingly, every candidate, without exception, raised the issue of building works and drilling that took place in the afternoon of the first day, and the second day. Every candidate felt negatively impacted by this, including the physical discomfort of the noise, inability to concentrate during the exam, and the need to re-read passages of the critical appraisal repeatedly, leading to loss of time to answer the questions. Candidates also pointed out, that while the noise was worse during the 1b and 1a papers, there was also intermittent drilling throughout both days.

Candidates understood that the building works were outside the venue and the FPH's control and did appreciate that there was an informal agreement with the builders, and that the invigilators did what

they could. However, some candidates felt the invigilators repeatedly interrupting the exam to apologise for the noise exacerbated an already tense situation rather than disarming it.

Candidates in the reasonable adjustment room also felt they were particularly badly affected as they were closest to the building work.

Candidates that had banked paper I, and therefore were only sitting paper II were disappointed they were not warned of the building works, so that they could take actions to attempt to mitigate some the impact (e.g. ear plugs or noise cancelling headphones).

Most candidates suggested a free re-sit, and a change in venue, for those that failed, in recognition that the building works meant the exam was not a true representation of their public health knowledge.

Generally, other than the obviously very large caveat of the noise, the venue was generally well regarded, in an easy to reach location, near hotels and food venues. Generally, the lighting and temperature of the hall was thought to be good, although candidates noted that the waiting areas lacked seating and were rather cold. Some candidates also complained, as has been brought up previously, that the chairs are uncomfortable, and the wooden desks are wobbly, and provide another unneeded distraction to the exam process.

Paper 1 feedback

In general candidates remarked that the change in format to the paper questions, splitting them into more parts, was a positive one, making it easier to structure answers, and making it clearer what the examiners were looking for in answers. In addition, most candidates felt that the exam covered a broad selection of topics in the syllabus.

Some candidates felt that the new format occasionally led to parts of the paper feeling like they needed to provide very brief and potentially more shallow answers, as time pressures did not allow for them to expand on each question. Examples for this were given as questions 2 [REDACTED], where 4 marks were allocated for giving 2 strength and 2 weaknesses [REDACTED], and questions 9 and 10 [REDACTED]. In addition, candidates felt that sometimes by splitting the questions into multiple subsections there was a risk of inviting repetition ([REDACTED]) and thought this again discouraged giving an in depth answer.

Specific issues raised:

- Several registrars highlighted that they the question [REDACTED], had too many marks attached to it (6 marks), [REDACTED].
- Several candidates felt that the leadership and management section of the syllabus is outdated, focusing on older models with little evidence base, and that questions 9 and 10 contained a lot of overlap, [REDACTED].

Paper 2a feedback

Many candidates that feedback on this mentioned that they felt that the article picked for the critical appraisal was substantially more complex than those given in the specimen papers on the FPH website, leading to time pressures in the exam, (also not helped by the building works). This complexity also meant a large portion of the 600-work appraisal was needed to give the key results, and the relatively novel study design meant the strength, weaknesses and the overall public health context was significantly harder to appraise. Some candidates also mentioned that the statistical

methods used in the paper are not on the syllabus, so it was difficult to assess whether they were appropriate. As mentioned in previous sittings, the changing of wording of the critical appraisal question as compared to the specimens available on the FPH website caused some surprise to registrars.

Specific issues raised:

- Several candidates found that the follow up questions for the critical appraisal were more open-ended than the examples available in previous papers and found this made it difficult to work out what the examiners were looking for in questions with relatively few marks attached to them. In particular question 3 was raised multiple times as an example of this.

Paper 2b feedback

As has been raised in multiple previous feedback letters, most of the registrars that gave feedback complained about the time pressures of this exam, and of course this was compounded by the noise of the building works. Many registrars also noted that this was not a realistic way to assess registrar knowledge of statistical methods or interpretations, as this is rarely expected to be done under such time pressures, particularly as statistical formulae have to be memorised.

Several candidates brought up that they felt data were not clearly presented in multiple questions. For example, [REDACTED] and outcomes reversed from the conventional presentation which was felt almost to be a “trick” question.

Some candidates also felt the questions did not cover enough of the syllabus, with multiple questions requiring [REDACTED].

Specific issues raised:

- Question 1 was brought up by multiple registrars as particularly difficult and complexly worded, with significant amounts of data manipulation. As the first question in the exam, this caused further stress and time pressure for the rest of the exam. Particular comments included that the [REDACTED] was more rarely used version than the one taught on masters programmes or used in practice, and that tables were unclear and did not include a reference category, and that the introduction was overly long and wordy.
- One question was noted to have six sub-sections and this was felt to make giving comprehensive answers, while still sticking to the timing of the question difficult.

Comments on any other issues

A few registrars brought up the issues around handwriting essays and the possibility of computerised testing. I know this has been extensively discussed at both the education committee and diplomate development committee and found to be logistically and financially unviable at this time but am raising it so that it can be considered as on-going issue in the future.

Candidates were also mentioned a desire for more detailed feedback in the future. Both for paper I and II. For paper I candidates would like the title (or at least a reminder) of the question topic, while understanding that the question bank would have to be preserved. For paper II candidates were hoping for a more detailed breakdown of the marks by question, so they could know for example, if the critical appraisal or the follow up questions were where they lost most marks.

Candidates also raised the issues that the specimen papers for both paper IIA and IIB were insufficient to prepare for the papers, as they are both insufficient in number (and some were taken down before the exam) and similarity to the questions present in the actual exam, particularly noting the format of the critical appraisal.

Several candidates, who were resitting a paper after having banked one, also questioned the fairness of having to pay the whole fee when only sitting one day of the exam.

Conclusions

Obviously, feedback for this sitting was dominated by the noise issues present on both days, and I know this will be discussed in depth at the examiners board meeting. However, there were still several common themes that can be brought out from the rest of the feedback. Most notably the general approval of the change in the format of the paper I, the increased complexity of the journal article picked for the critical appraisal article, and the time pressures of paper IIB. I know these issues, particularly around the timings of the statistics questions has come up multiple times before, and has is being reviews, but it is important to reinforce that this is a consistent and on-going issues that has appeared at multiple sittings.

Please don't hesitate to get in contact with me if you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alex Allen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Alex" and the last name "Allen" clearly distinguishable.

Alexander Allen

Vice Chair of the SRC

On behalf of the SRC