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Vice Chair of the
Speciality Registrar Committee

Chair of DFPH Examiners
Faculty of Public Health
4 St Andrews Place London NW1 4LB

04th May 2022

Dear Dr Ward,

Re: DFPH feedback (March 2022 sitting)

Thank you for the opportunity to feed back the experiences and comments of registrars taking the Diplomate exam in March 2022. I requested feedback from all registrars who sat the exam, via their regional SRC representatives, and also via a general email request to the public health registrar Google group. In total there were 10 respondents. Their feedbacks were collated and presented below.

Organisation of the exam

Similar to feedback from recent sittings, the logistics and preparations leading up to the exam were highly commended. Registrars mentioned they were well supported by Faculty staff and felt fully prepared from a practicality point of view. Several registrars cited that the exams were well organised and noted their appreciation for the pre-exam webinar and the opportunity to test the software in advance. Laura Bland in particular was yet again mentioned by several registrars and praised for being diligent, friendly and putting people at ease.

There was however a comment regarding a document that was sent out with incorrect deadlines but these issues were resolved.

The Invigilators and the online platform

Generally, most registrars reported that overall interactions with invigilators were positive and invigilators were noted as being accommodating. This is an improvement from the last sitting and the invigilators should be commended.

There were however some negative feedback about the invigilation process, most of these centred around variation in practices. Registrars noted that some invigilators conducted a thorough check of the room whilst other invigilators only did an ID check. One registrar also mentioned that invigilator gave incorrect information about use of calculators in Paper 1 and another registrar mentioned that when they experienced technical issues, the invigilators expected near constant communication to problem-solve. Whilst this might have been an attempt to be as helpful as possible, the registrar involved found the process stressful because of constant instant messaging from invigilator during a timed exam.

There were generally very positive feedback from the registrars about the online platform and several registrars mentioned the platform was user-friendly and easy to navigate. Some registrars also reported positive impact on health and wellbeing with the online exams. There were some issues reported such as font size being too small, sound problem and screen temporarily disappearing – which understandably was reported as being very stressful. However registrars also noted the responsiveness of the technical team and the autosave functionality which ensures previous work was not lost.

Time allocated for each exam

Most registrars reported that time allocation was about right for the exams. This is particularly the case for Paper 2 where several registrars commented on the fairness of the time allocated and registrars commended the changes implemented for Paper 2B. Only one of the respondents thought the time allocation for Paper 2A was insufficient. Some registrars however mentioned Paper 1 was time pressured and difficult to answer which may be related to additional feedback received on the content of Paper 1 as described below.

Paper 1

Whilst a handful of registrars mentioned they found the content of Paper 1 to be reasonable and appropriate for the syllabus, several registrars raised a number of issues about the content of this paper with some registrars reporting that Paper 1 was a disservice to the months of hard work candidates have invested to prepare for the exam, as they felt several questions could have been answered without any public health knowledge. This was reported as incredibly frustrating and disheartening. An example of this was Q10 and the question on transport and health.

Q10 was also the most cited question for its vagueness and repetitive sub-questions. Several registrars mentioned that the question was confusing with each sub-question appearing to be asking for the same information and this was reported as unfair especially as registrars were mindful of previous examiners' comments about candidates not repeating themselves in different parts of the same question.

Q1 and Q2 were reported as covering very similar aspect of syllabus (and also duplication of material within Paper 2) which registrar reported as frustrating because other key public health skills e.g. epidemiology, study design, and qualitative research were not tested. Some registrars also noted that Q1 was asking candidates for "issues" with data provided in a table however registrars reported that it was not clear whether the examiners wanted epidemiological issues or the issues that the data itself presented.

Some registrars also reported that part of Q2 awarded high marks for providing basic definition and interpretation and registrar was unclear of what is expected for such high value question. Conversely, some registrars reported that questions on behaviour change / health promotion models asked for a substantial amount of information with insufficient amount of time allocated.

Similar to previous feedbacks, some registrars also mentioned that, given the breadth of topics in the syllabus, the questions in Paper 1 appear to focus on very narrow aspect of the syllabus. Examples given included the questions on culture and mental health data. There were also issues raised on the question on [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (ambiguous) and [REDACTED] (repetition).

Paper 2

Registrars were positive in their feedback for Paper 2A with some registrars reporting that the paper was fair, the questions were clear and easy to understand and, overall in line with expectations. There were no negative feedbacks received for Paper 2A.

A number of issues were reported on Paper 2B with majority of the issues relating to potential repetitions in the questions. For example, several registrars mentioned that there were 2 questions that examined the same statistical procedures (e.g. [REDACTED]) while other important procedures were unexamined. Several registrars (including those who thought they performed well on these questions) mentioned that the repetition was unfair as it would potentially penalise some candidates twice in addition to missed opportunity to assess other competences on the syllabus.

Some of the registrars mentioned the welcome change in Paper 2B style from calculation-based questions to those requiring interpretation however, there were frustrations expressed about the amount of time required to memorise several formulae which were then not examined. There were further requests for the Faculty to provide a sheet of formulae in the exam especially now that these formulae are not being tested. I know the Faculty have been reviewing this and an announcement is due imminently.

Some registrars also mentioned there were some errors in the exams. Examples provided included typo on how many sub-questions were available for one of the questions and missing information (or difficult to find) on [REDACTED] question.

Other issues raised

Exams format and fees – Some registrars have once again requested the opportunity to sit papers separately so they could accommodate it with MPH / placement requirements. Some registrars have also requested that the FPH should reconsider their policy on charging the full examination price for those who only need to re-sit one paper, especially as the exams are now on-line.

Some registrars also expressed that the examination process should be more supportive and realistic of public health practice, whilst some registrars questioned the purpose and utility of these exams given the high fail rate. One registrar enquired if the Faculty have considered modular open-book type of assessments. In the response to my last letter, the examiners mentioned there are discussions ongoing as to whether Paper 1 and Paper 2 could be regarded as separate assessments. It would be helpful to get an update on this topic.

Past papers – There were requests for more Paper 2B specimen paper with model answers and questions that are more-aligned to the interpretation style of questioning seen in recent papers, as this would further aid preparation. Registrars also mentioned examiner comments on past papers that are available online on the FPH website are very demoralising with comments such as this is “poor”. I know that the Faculty indicated in the response to my last letter that there is a plan to review the materials/past papers available, it would be helpful if more helpful examiners comments could also be included when more past papers are made available.

Wellbeing – Three registrars commented on the negative impact of the exams on their wellbeing. The comments centred around the intensity of the exams over two consecutive days which was noted as highly stressful and impacted health, both mentally and physically. One registrar in particular, who is considering taking a break from training, mentioned the negative impact of the exams on their stress-induced long-term health problem which has been exacerbated by the exams. I know the Faculty have explored options on how to mitigate the negative impact of exams on registrar’s wellbeing and a decision has been made to introduce a break between the two-day exams.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions regarding any of the points raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely,



Fatai Ogunlayi
Vice Chair of the SRC
On behalf of the SRC