



Faculty of Public Health

Of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom

Working to improve the public's health

23rd August 2018

Dear Caroline

Re: Feedback from the SRC on the June 2018 sitting of the Part A examination

Thank you for your report collating and summarising the comments received from colleagues who took this exam in June 2018. Please accept my apologies for the delay in receiving my response, which will also be published on the FPH website in due course.

Practicalities and organisation of the exam/invigilators

It was good to hear that the organisation, venue and invigilators all received positive comments from candidates, and we will raise the issue about lighting with the venue. I was sorry to hear that some candidates felt the invigilators did not act consistently at the beginning and end of the exam. These issues are clearly dealt with in our instructions for invigilators and we will ensure these are brought to their notice.

Preparation and feedback

I am aware from previous feedback that candidates would like to see additional materials added to the FPH website, and we were pleased to be able to add additional Paper IIB questions earlier this year. On a number of occasions I notice that the comments you received refer to a 'new question style' and whether the available past papers offer sufficient preparation for these. I presume this relates to an increasing tendency for Paper I questions to be split into multiple sections, and as in my response to comments on the June 2017 sitting, I believe this has been a trend for some time now and that the more recent past papers do reflect this. In any case, the advice to candidates has always been to structure an answer, and a well-structured response has always attracted additional credit.

Lack of clarity on the syllabus

Issues relating to the syllabus were raised in feedback following the January 2018 sitting, and in his reply, Prof Holland noted that the syllabus for the Part A exam will be reviewed in parallel with the next review of the Public Health training curriculum. He also reminded candidates that all questions are set by practising Public Health specialists and are considered to relate to current public health practice. We believe that the current syllabus is specified in sufficient detail to permit a candidate to prepare for the exam, and all questions are explicitly linked to a sub-section of the syllabus. I cannot comment on how those running revision sessions interpret or use the exam syllabus.

Closed bank of questions

Candidates should not share questions in any circumstances; this is emphasised in the instructions to candidates provided by the invigilators prior to the exam. A closed bank of questions for all papers was introduced alongside question standard setting. These developments offer important educational advantages,

enabling examiners to use psychometric information to monitor the quality of questions used and adapt or improve them as appropriate. New questions will continue to be set, but the use of a closed bank has also allowed examiners to improve the process of 'blueprinting' the exam, ensuring fair and adequate coverage of the syllabus. A closed bank of questions has been used for Paper IIB for some time now without incident.

Location and delivery of the exam

As in Prof Holland's response to comments received following the January 2018 sitting, we have previously explored the option of computer based testing, but the costs were prohibitive. However, this is an area that remains under review. Similarly, running more than one site greatly increases costs, and we rely on London-based FPH staff for exam delivery. The fee for the exam reflects the costs of running it. Each sitting that a candidate applies for is considered an attempt, regardless of whether they have already banked a paper, which actually makes only a relatively small difference to the costs incurred.

We do not accept that there is any case for banking individual sub-papers. While there is a case for separating the more knowledge based Paper I from the more skills based Paper II, candidates are expected to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the scientific basis of public health, and their ability to apply their knowledge and skills to the practice of public health, across the full breadth of the syllabus.

Paper IA and IB

I am pleased to see that comments relating to Paper I are generally positive, and importantly that questions were fair. We do recognise that the exam is challenging and can be time pressured, but this is to be expected from a professional exam.

Paper IIA and IIB

Again, I was pleased to see a number of positive comments relating to these papers. In response to a couple of the comments, I must emphasise that there will inevitably be some cross over of material between Paper I and Paper II, and this is explicitly stated on the FPH website page that describes the structure of the exam. In addition, I was disappointed to read that one candidate felt there were questions designed to 'trip you up'. I can assure you that this is very far from the truth, and each question is reviewed and considered by multiple practising Public Health specialists at every step.

I note that the published paper used in Paper IIA was thought to be complex and potentially advantage candidates with clinical backgrounds. I agree that the paper was relatively long, which is an increasing feature of academic papers published in leading journals, but it did address an important public health topic that has significance at all levels of practise (local, national and global). The complexity of the paper and its appraisal was considered in detail as part of the standard setting process.

I note that you received several comments referring to a new component in Paper IIA question 1, which reflected a slight change in how this question was worded. Putting the findings from the paper as well as your conclusions into a public health context and identifying how this might impact on public health or public health practice is an important part of the skills we are asking candidates to demonstrate, and have previously attracted additional credit (see part papers on the FPH website). However, I accept that this may have been implicit in the past, whereas the wording of this question made it explicit. Candidates would be advised to think carefully before relying on a particular question wording and should always read and respond to the question as written, not assuming that a particular pattern will always be followed.

Specific question issues from both papers

In response to the comments on questions from Paper I:

- Candidates should be aware that there is inevitably some cross over between Papers I and II (as described above).
- Questions from a particular section may be drawn from any part of that section's syllabus.


- The final question could potentially have been interpreted in slightly different ways, however the examiners gave credit wherever an appropriate response was given.

In response to the comments on questions from Paper II:

- We believe the statistical terminology used in the question is of a standard type and the distribution mentioned is explicitly listed in the syllabus.

Thank you once again for your time and care in collecting, collating and summarising all these comments; these are discussed widely by examiners and are very helpful in shaping our thinking and the development of the exam. Please get in touch if any of this response is unclear or further information is needed.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "D. J. Ward". The letters are cursive and fluidly connected.

Dr Derek Ward, Deputy Chair of Examiners