

Summary Report visit to view Professional and Linguistics Assessments Board (PLAB) exam GMC Manchester, 4 Dec 2108

Dr M Forrest and Dr D Doyle observed the PLAB exam at the GMC in Manchester as part of the ongoing Primary FRCA OSCE review process

PLAB background

The PLAB exam is sat by International Medical Graduates (IMG) – from outside EU, who wish to practice in the UK. The exam is composed of 2 parts. Part 1 is a 180 SBA type exam sat in both UK and internationally. Part 2 is an OSCE type exam which is only run at the assessment centre in Manchester. There appears to be an ever increasing demand by IMGs to sit the exam. It is expected that the PLAB 2 exam will be run on up to 150 days this year, 36 candidates a day...up to 5,400 candidates per year. This figure is expected to increase next year.

Format

The PLAB 2 exam is blueprinted against clinical practice expected of an F2 doctor and is mapped against the GMC's core guidance Good medical practice, the Outcomes for provisionally registered doctors July 2015 (originally published in The Trainee Doctor) and the UK Foundation Programme curriculum 2016. The blueprint is enclosed (*but is a 130 page PDF document*)

The format of the OSCE exam is a series of 18 stations. Each station lasts 8 minutes with a 90 second gap between each station. 2 rest stations are included. Each round with 18 candidates therefore takes a minimum of 3 hours 10 minutes. The same questions are repeated the afternoon, with candidates quarantined over lunch. A total of 36 candidates are examined per day

The assessment centre is a dedicated area, with individual rooms and a central desk for floor staff. Each station is run behind a closed door – minimising noise and distraction. A speaker system feeding into all station is used to identify start, 2 minutes to end and completion of each station

Standard Setting

Examiners are allocated as pairs at the beginning of the morning. They are expected to discuss together each other's station as a process of calibration. The standard expected is agreed upon, detailed discussion with role player is held and a practice run through is done. Key expected actions by candidates are identified.

Candidates are marked across 3 domains

Domain 1: Data gathering, technical and assessment skills

Domain 2: Clinical management skills

Domain 3 Interpersonal skill

Examples of positive actions and negative actions are included for each domain relative to each individual station. This is used as a guide to the examiner rather than a prescriptive check list. Each domain was marked equally without weighting

Each domain is marked on a 4 point scale

Examiners then allocate an overall global scale and Border Line Regression is used to calculate a station pass mark. Candidates must pass at least 12 of 18 stations in order to pass

If a candidate is marked as unsatisfactory or fail as a global rating, the examiner is obliged to identify (at least 1 or more) from a list of 11 descriptors as to why the score was allocated e.g. unsafe practice, lack of empathy, not listening etc etc. The examiners are unable to progress unless this process is completed. Descriptive prose by an examiner is not required or used for feedback. This feedback process is done via the ipad marking tablet.

There was very little if any direct interaction between the examiner and the candidate during the OSCE. Examiners sat quietly, simply observing the candidate's performance. Use of the ipad for marking was only done once the station was complete at the end of the 8 minutes

Process

Marking is used via an ipad, results uploaded wirelessly. The process appears simple and efficient. OSCE management staff are able to view the uploaded domain scores for all stations in real time in a remote office. Examiners have the ability to call for assistance or to raise a concern about the candidate via the ipad. The alert is transmitted to the senior OSCE supervisor or 1 of 2 invigilators on the floor.

Real time video is also used to monitor the process of the each OSCE station. 2 discreet ceiling cameras are used. Videos are not saved or stored.

Domain scores and Global rating scores are uploaded to a server. Separate software is used to calculate BLR and cut scores for each station. 1.2 SEMS are used. Publication of results is delayed for 4 weeks to allow full process review.

Question Bank, Staff and Examiners

The PLAB OSCE has approximately 250 questions in their bank. This may appear small when considering the size of the blueprint document. New questions are written by a "Development team". This team presents new questions, adjusts and amends them. New questions are then run on a pilot

day, commonly using senior medical students as candidates. The development team are a separate group from the general examiners

There are presently approx. 400 PLAB examiners. Each examiner is expected to do at least 6 exams a year. About 22-24 examiners are required for each exam day. Examiners may examine for single days or 2-3 consecutive days depending on personal circumstances. Examiners are paid £310.00 per day with additional accommodation costs as required. New questions setters, the development team are paid on a daily basis for their work. The selection process of new examiners was not discussed. It was evident from the days scheduling paperwork that the examiners come from a range of specialties - both hospital based and primary care.

The training of new examiners was not fully discussed

There only appears to be a limited formal audit / appraisal process of examiners. Examiners can be observed in real time by senior staff. The exam produces extensive and detailed metrics. Inappropriate marking patterns can be identified and examiners are provided with their relative hawk / dove mark on an annual basis. Examiners are expected to complete a minimum of a 4 year tenure

Future development of the PLAB OSCE

There is expected to be an increasing demand by IMG to sit the PLAB. The GMC have invested in additional space in nearby building (at a significant though not confirmed cost). This will allow the exam to be run as 2 parallel rounds, increasing the numbers of candidates examined per day to 72. It is estimated that up to 600 additional PLAB examiners may be required to meet the increase in exam activity

Positive learning points

Physical structure / layout of exam centre

The use of dedicated exam centre, large separate rooms, central timing etc. provides a good environment to run an OSCE. This is in significant contrast to the facilities used by the RCoA

Dedicated / integral video observation allows real time quality control of OSCE delivery and role player performance

Calibration by paired examiners increases reliability and ensures agreed standard setting of station

Domain marking – allows assessment across 3 domains. Examples of good and bad practice for each station are provided as aides to examiners

There is minimal interaction between examiner and candidate. Marking is a quick and simple process done in gap between each station. The nature of

the stations meant that there was no need for resetting of stations between candidates.

Real time review of process and question delivery. Carried out by 2 floor invigilators, 2 members of delivery team, role player supervisor and OSCE lead. Any comments or issues raised by examiners during calibration process were reviewed.

Particular & detailed attention was given to instructions given to role player to ensure consistency for each candidate. This process was facilitated by video observation and invigilators sitting in on stations.

Other issues

OSCE duration / candidate numbers

Significant thought and consideration will have to be given to length of time of each OSCE station and its impact on the number of candidates that can be examined per day. The PLAB format (8 minute station, 90 second gap) means that only 36 candidates can be examined per day. Current FRCA OSCE practice expects up to 64 candidates per day, using a 5 minute station / 1 minute gap format. OSCE exams reviewed by the review group are all using longer stations up to 7-9 minutes in length

Examiners

The engagement between examiners and the PLAB exam is quite different from our practice within the RCOA. With the PLAB, the GMC has the combination of a large pool of examiners (400+) Attendance by examiners is on a daily basis rather than exams weeks as per FRCA. Examiners are expected to deliver 6 exams per year as a minimum, but can do more if they wish. Examiners are paid (approx. £315.00 per day plus limited expenses) Examiners are expected to be available for exams in their own time or in flexible SPA. This appears to provide the GMS with a much greater degree of flexibility re examiners, though I was unable to confirm what contingencies were in place when now examiners were available. There did not appear to be any sense of any "collegiate cohesiveness" of the PLAB examiners as a group. PLAB organisers acknowledged this but felt that it was not their responsibility to provide or facilitate this

Rental of GMC facilities

PLAB organisers advised us that it may be possible to rent out the existing assessment centre for exam purposes once their new facilities are fully operational. This is likely to be in late 2019 and I am awaiting further details re possible arrangements and costs