

1 November 2022

Dear Academy Council and College/Faculty Chief Executives,
CC Academy Assessment Committee,

We are writing to you to express our concerns at systemic issues with exam delivery, marking and reporting which have occurred in recent years. We are asking Colleges and Faculties to work together to share lessons learned and best practice with a view to improving processes for trainees.

The Academy Trainee Doctors' Group (ATDG) represents trainees in postgraduate training and therefore these issues have naturally formed a part of our agenda and discussions. To explore these complex challenges in more detail, we recently asked trainee representatives (in conjunction with their respective committees) to provide further information about any exam/recruitment-related issues which have had a significant impact. This allowed us to identify common themes and shared learning opportunities leading to potential solutions. From this feedback, we have identified the following themes:

Delivery of exams, exam results and recruitment outcomes:

- Exam marking errors leading to incorrect results being delivered to trainees, due to transcription or calculation errors.
- Delayed results associated with inadequate communication from the relevant teams as to why, and when the results can be expected.
- Candidates being incorrectly informed of the outcome of recruitment applications, including errors in where they are appointed to.
- Poor communication with trainees when errors occur (both notification and subsequent actions), often not featuring an apology or acknowledgement of the significant implications of the error and delays for trainees.

As the recent GMC National Training Survey has highlighted, we are seeing rising levels of burnout, and are very mindful of the impact that errors around high stakes exams and recruitment can have on trainees. There are significant implications for individual wellbeing, training progression, and career plans affecting not only the specific individual but often their families.

We appreciate that recruitment is led at a national level but wished to share common errors across exams and recruitment given the combined impact these have on trainees.

It is recognised that errors can and do happen across the different sectors of our profession. It is also recognised that the administration and workload associated with the delivery of examinations and results is significant and high-pressured. However, errors in the delivery of exam/recruitment results should be regarded as 'never events' within medical education and training. It is important that if they do happen, learning points are derived and preventative measures are put in place. We feel that there are opportunities for shared learning to prevent these from happening in the future, across the respective Medical Royal Colleges and Faculties.

Feedback from trainees has also highlighted concerns regarding the delivery of exams, specifically related to technical IT issues frequently experienced by candidates sitting online exams. Also, in some cases where test centres are used, they are unable to make adaptations for candidates with reasonable adjustments resulting in extra travel for these candidates. It is therefore important that optimising the delivery of examinations continues to be a priority.

We are very keen to work together with Colleges and Faculties to support opportunities for change, and would therefore be grateful if you and the appropriate teams could consider the following specific requests from the committee:

- Where systemic errors occur, Colleges should make contact with the relevant trainee committees to notify them of the event, and work together to formulate a strategy to communicate the information appropriately with the affected trainees, the subsequent plan, and provide the necessary support that will be needed.
- Where errors occur, affected trainees are contacted at the earliest opportunity, offered an apology and provided with the clear strategy and timescale for subsequent steps to remedy the error. There should be clear lines of communication available and open for them to be able to access the relevant College/Faculty department to discuss any challenges or seek support.
- That Colleges have a plan for extraordinary circumstances whereby an exam venue is no longer able to offer a sitting (for example, an unscheduled public bank holiday). Where an exam needs to be rescheduled, alternative dates are offered after consultation with trainee groups and offered in a timely fashion.
- The results/outcomes/summaries of any internal investigations or reviews into an error should be shared with trainee committees, and made accessible to the wider trainee body, to reassure current and future trainees that steps have been taken to mitigate similar events happening again.
- When errors occur, the learning points derived from these events and subsequent investigations should be shared between Colleges, to help prevent them from happening to other Colleges. This can be facilitated via the Academy.
- We would encourage a review of all current practices related to exam result/recruitment outcome delivery to ensure that potential opportunities for errors in the process can be identified at an early stage and appropriate steps taken.
- Colleges should work to ensure that trainees who require reasonable adjustments are not negatively impacted financially by travelling to distant locations which facilitate the adjustments that are required.

We are aware that as part of the work of the Academy Assessment Committee, Colleges and Faculties have been asked to survey members about their experiences of online and remote exams, with the aim of sharing common principles for running online and remote exams. We hope that this letter will support the continued progression of this and other work in this area, helping to significantly reduce the frequency of systemic errors, improving the communication with affected individuals, and restoring the high level of confidence that trainees should have in the system of assessment.

Yours sincerely,

Academy Trainee Doctors' Group