

National Examination for Physician Associates

Regulations for candidates sitting the National Examination

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Introduction

All Physician Associates (PAs) have a duty placed on them by the Managed Voluntary Register (MVR) to be honest and trustworthy. Candidate performance in the National Examination is reviewed by doctors, Physician Associates and other appropriate health professionals who themselves have a duty to notify the Managed Voluntary Register if they have concerns. Misconduct related to the National Examination assessments may be referred to the MVR and or the university, as appropriate.

Purpose of these Regulations

These Regulations relate to the assessments undertaken by Physician Associates (PA) sitting the National Examination.

Date of publication

These Regulations will be reviewed annually, or as needed, and may change over time. Candidates should be familiar with the current Regulations. The current version will be downloadable from the FPA website. The PA National Examination Sub-committee will give appropriate advance notice of any change that may have a material effect on candidates.

Data protection

The personal data and test data of PA National Examination candidates will be stored and processed by the PA National Examination Sub-committee in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Test security and copyright

Assessment material relating to the PA National Examination is confidential, protected by copyright and subject to non-disclosure requirements, which candidates and examiners must observe. It must not be placed in the public domain, disclosed to or discussed with any unauthorised person under any circumstances except with the express, written permission of the PA National Examination Sub-committee.

Candidates who are found to have infringed these requirements will be penalised in accordance with the guidance on misconduct in these Regulations.

Purpose of the assessment

The PA National Certification Examination (UK) is a combination of two examinations, written and clinical, the passing of which will result in the Physician Associate being entitled to apply for registration on the MVR and commence work as a Physician Associate in the UK.

Physician Associates are required to undertake and pass the PA National Recertification Examination every six years, which consists of a written examination only. The PA National Examination is developed and managed by the Faculty of Physician Associates (FPA) Examination Sub-committee.

Assessment structure and content

The PA National Examination has two components, which test a range of skills and knowledge. Together they cover the Physician Associate core competencies and curriculum, as described in the *Competence and Curriculum Framework for the Physician Assistant* (DoH, 2006, Revised 2012).

National Examination Components

Written Examination – Certification and Recertification

The written examination is an assessment of the knowledge base underpinning the Physician Associate role. Currently, it is comprised of two papers, each of one hundred single best answer (SBA) questions. At present, candidates are allowed two hours for each paper with a break in between. The papers are set by members of the PA National examination sub-committee. The pass mark is calculated using a modified Angoff method, with a minimum of six participants.

Following the examination, statistical analysis is performed and the papers are reviewed. Errors or poorly performing questions are identified and reviewed by the examination sub-committee chair or deputy and members from the examination sub-committee. If necessary, items are removed prior to results being finalised and released to the candidates.

The certifying examination is run three times each year, usually in September, January and May. Unsuccessful candidates are expected to resit at the next available examination.

Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) – Certification Only

The OSCE assesses the ability to integrate and apply clinical, professional, communication and practical skills appropriate for Physician Associates. It utilizes patient based scenarios that are relevant to PA competencies, using simulated patients/actors, real patients, simulation models and volunteers.

Candidates currently undertake fourteen stations. Examiners are appropriately qualified and trained to mark the station which they are examining and are aware of the level of performance expected from a newly qualified Physician Associate. Successful candidates must pass both a total pass mark **and** pass 10/14 stations (or > 70% of stations)

Making an application to take the PA National Examination

Eligibility

The PA National Certification Examination (UK) has been designed for candidates who have completed the requirements of a university programme in Physician Associate studies, within the UK education system. Examinations are held across the UK, and candidates may have to travel to undertake the examination.

Application process

Students currently registered on a UK PA programme can enter the PA National Examination after completion of the requirements of their course (confirmation of the university examination board is a requirement prior to the exam).

Fees

The current fees for the examination are stated below. The FPA reserves the right to review these fees annually.

OSCE £375

Written exam £175

Recertification exam £275

Fees must have been received and be cleared in advance.

Withdrawal of an application for the written examination and/ or OSCE

Candidates who wish to withdraw from a sitting of the PA National Certification Examination (UK) must inform the FPA in writing, by post or email. There will be no cancellation fee for those candidates who applied for sitting the exam, but subsequently found out that they didn't achieve the required level to pass their PA programme.

Candidates for the PA National Certification Examination (UK) will be permitted to take the assessment at a subsequent sitting for no additional fee if notice of

withdrawal is received at least 2 weeks before the exam. Candidates who withdraw and do not intend on taking the assessment at a subsequent sitting are eligible for a refund less a £25 administration fee.

It is at the discretion of the PA National Examination sub-committee to decide about the cancellation fee where a candidate withdraws from an assessment because of mitigating circumstances or pregnancy related problems or a certified illness.

Reasonable adjustment

Candidates who have a disability, for example a visual impairment or dyslexia within the scope of the [Equality Act 2010](#), should inform the FPA in advance; we may be able to make reasonable adjustments to the exam arrangements, such as producing information in large print.

These adjustments will not entail the lowering of standards of assessment nor will they exempt candidates from demonstrating that they are fit to practice independently as a Physician Associate in the UK.

All candidates have to inform the FPA **at least two weeks** before the exam if they require reasonable adjustments during the exam.

Please refer to the [Reasonable Adjustment Policy](#) for further information.

Mitigating circumstances

Candidates with accepted mitigating circumstances are deemed not to have sat the initial examination. Mitigating circumstances will not result in additional marks being awarded. However, candidates who report mitigating circumstances using the [Mitigating Circumstances Request Form](#) that are accepted by the PA National Examination Sub-committee may, under the following regulations, have the fees for a re-sit waived, and/or be permitted to take the SBA and/ or OSCE once more.

The PA National Examination sub-committee would normally expect a candidate who believed that their performance was likely to be affected by mitigating circumstances arising **before** an assessment to withdraw from that sitting and re-sit at a later date by using the [Mitigating Circumstances Request Form](#).

If mitigating circumstances arise **during** the course of an assessment which the candidate believes are having a material, detrimental effect on their performance, the candidate would be expected to withdraw from the sitting and re-sit at a later date.

If a candidate decides to proceed with an assessment even though s/he believes that mitigating circumstances are having an effect on their performance, then the mitigating circumstances **must be reported** to the Chief Invigilator or invigilator who will complete a contemporaneous record which will be signed by the candidate.

Candidates reporting mitigating circumstances during an assessment will not normally be allowed any additional time to complete an assessment unless an error of process on the part of the PA National Examination sub-committee or test centre has denied them the full time to complete the assessment.

All reports of mitigating circumstances should be submitted to the FPA as soon as the circumstances arise or as soon as possible thereafter and no later than two working days after the assessment takes place.

A PA National Examination [Mitigating Circumstances Form](#) must be completed and compelling, independent, written evidence of the mitigating circumstances must be provided. No report of mitigating circumstances, submitted after the publication of results, will be considered.

All reports of mitigating circumstances will be considered by a panel including the FPA and the Chair of the PA National Examination sub-committee, or a nominated deputy, who may consult others as they see fit.

Conduct of assessments

Candidates are expected to comply with the PA National Examination Regulations and the [Code of Conduct for Examination Candidates](#) in addition to the below rules.

As a condition of participating in an assessment, invigilators, examiners, role players/patients and candidates agree not to disclose any information about the assessment or its material.

Before the assessment

Candidates are expected to arrive at venue on or before the time specified by the FPA.

Candidates who arrive late will not be permitted to take the assessment and will not be able to claim a refund of fees.

Candidates will be asked to provide officials at the venue with photographic proof of their identity. If satisfactory proof of identity cannot be provided to the exam officials, the candidate may not be permitted to take the assessment and will forfeit their application fee, if applicable.

The only item of equipment candidates will be allowed to take into the assessment is their stethoscope. All other equipment will be provided.

During the assessment

Candidates must not communicate with anyone except officials directly involved in administering/delivering the assessment both during assessments and when entering or leaving the examination area.

The following must not be brought into the room where the assessment is taking place:

- Any electronic or electrical equipment (including mobile phones)
- Paper of any kind
- Bags
- Coats
- Food and drink
- Non-essential medicines

A candidate who needs to leave the assessment room or test centre for a short period must be accompanied by an invigilator or other official. No additional time will be allowed to complete the assessment.

For quality assurance purposes you may be observed either by an observer within the station or via CCTV monitoring. Candidates are required to accept that examinations may be monitored.

After the assessment

Assessment material relating to the PA National Examination is confidential and copyright and subject to non-disclosure requirements. It must not be placed in the public domain or passed to or discussed with any unauthorised individual under any circumstances except with the express, written permission of the PA National Examination sub-committee. Candidates who are found to have infringed these requirements will be penalised in accordance with the guidance on misconduct in these Regulations.

Allegations of candidate misconduct

If misconduct is alleged during an assessment the candidate will normally be allowed to complete that component of the assessment. A record of the allegation will be made by the chief invigilator and a copy subsequently given to the candidate.

Alleged misconduct before, during or after assessments will be reported to the PA National Examination sub-committee.

Results will be withheld whilst allegations of misconduct are investigated.

The Chair of the PA National Examination sub-committee or their nominee will collect evidence relating to the allegation. Where a case of misconduct is established, the Chair of the PA National Examination sub-committee may, if the case appears to be isolated or minor, deal with the matter him/herself. In all other cases, a misconduct panel will be convened.

A panel may be convened to consider serious allegations. Panels will have at least three members, at least one of whom will have been present at the original examination. At least one panel member will not have been present at the original examination.

Allegations of misconduct will normally be considered on the basis of paper evidence only and oral hearings will not be held. However, in exceptional circumstances the misconduct panel may consider to hold an oral hearing. The candidate will have the right to be accompanied at the hearing by a family member, friend, colleague or a member of their professional body. Candidates may not be accompanied by a legal representative. A candidate seeking to be accompanied should identify the person accompanying him or her and inform the misconduct panel at least five days in advance of the hearing.

In taking a decision on whether or not misconduct has occurred, the panel will act reasonably and objectively, observing the principles of natural justice. The panel will make its decision on the balance of probabilities.

The panel's decision will be communicated to the candidate in writing, with reasons, as soon as is reasonably possible and normally no more than six weeks after receipt of the allegation.

The panel may impose one or more of the following sanctions or any other reasonable sanction as it sees fit:

- The candidate will be issued with a formal warning and a note of the likely penalties if further misconduct takes place
- The result for that component of the National Examination will be declared void
- The results from all components taken to date will be declared void
- The candidate will be barred from taking any component for a set period
- The candidate will be barred from taking any component at any time in the future (which may impact on the MVR status of recertification candidates)
- The candidates supervisor/employer/university will be informed about the outcome of the misconduct.

The PA National Examination sub-committee reserves the right to inform the FPA of any case of alleged misconduct, proven or otherwise. All conduct issues will be considered when applying for the PA MVR.

Marking

The two components of the PA National Examination are marked/assessed in different ways.

The marks/outcomes of the two components of the assessment are received and considered by the PA National Exam Board after each National Examination.

Written Examination

Marks are generated electronically. Candidates are awarded one mark for each question answered correctly. There is no negative marking.

OSCE

The pass mark is set by using borderline regression methodology of standard setting. This means that the pass mark may vary from exam to exam. Examiners will record their grade using a structured mark sheet. Students have to pass 10/14 stations **and** the total pass mark.

Results

Notification of results

Results for both components of the National Certification Examination are issued to the candidate by the PA National Examination Board latest within four weeks of sitting the examination. In most cases the results will be released at an earlier stage. Results for the Recertification Examination are communicated by email.

PA National Examination sub-committee members, examiners and university staff are not permitted to discuss results with individual candidates prior to notification.

Attempts

Candidates have three attempts at each component of the examination with no more than 14 months between successfully passing one element and successfully passing the other (second component).

Example: A student passes the OSCE in January 2017 but failed the written component. The student can resit the MCQ in April 2017 (and fail) and pass in September 2017, or if ill for one of those iterations and pass in January 2018. If the student exceeds the limit of 14 months, they would have to re-take the previously passed component as well.

Feedback

Candidates are provided written feedback on each component of the assessment. The form of the feedback provided will be consistent with the purpose of the assessment.

Failures

Candidates who fail the written or OSCE examination are entitled to make further attempts as outlined above.

Failures that raise concerns about a candidate's fitness to practice, may be referred by the Chair of the Examination sub-committee or deputy to the university, employer and/or the FPA.

Quality Assurance

The PA National Examination sub-committee oversees the delivery and quality assurance of the PA National Examination.

Best-practice criterion-referencing techniques are used to ensure that pass/fail levels are applied equitably and rigorously.

Examiners and role-players

PA National OSCE examiners are appropriately trained for the role.

The performance of examiners will be monitored and reviewed.

OSCE examiners must have a minimum of three years' clinical post-qualification practice and have experience training or working with PAs so they understand the competency requirements. PAs approaching recertification may not have any involvement with the Recertification Examination for 12 months prior to sitting the examination.

The simulators and real patients used in the OSCE are trained both generically and in preparation for each case so that they deliver a standardised test.

The performance of simulators and real patients is monitored and reviewed by experienced examiners and role-player facilitators.

Assessment outcome psychometrics may be used to quality assure cases, examiners and role-players.

Data review

The PA National Examination sub-committee reviews candidate performance data, misconduct cases, complaints, appeals and equal opportunities monitoring data and publishes an exam report.

Complaints and appeals

A complaint relates to the administration or conduct of an assessment where there is no intention, as part of the complaint, to query the result of the assessment.

An appeal is a request for a review of the decision of the PA National Examination sub-committee to fail a candidate in a component of the PA National Examination. The appeals procedure is set out in the [Examination Appeals Regulations](#).

The two processes are separate but the subject of one may later become the subject of the other.

Complaints relating to the written and/or OSCE components of the PA National Examination and Recertification Examination should be made to the PA National Examination sub-committee.

The content of the complaints is normally confidential. No one involved in them shall, without the prior written consent of the PA National Examination Sub-committee, communicate, publish or otherwise disclose any detail, written material or evidence produced to any unauthorised person.

Complaints – Recertification Examination Only

A complaint will not normally be considered if its specific subject matter or closely related subject matter is currently being considered by the PA National Examination sub-committee as part of an appeal process, by the FPA under fitness to practice procedures or by a court, tribunal or similar.

Candidates will not suffer any disadvantage or recrimination as a result of making a complaint.

In the first instance a candidate should attempt to resolve a complaint informally, during or immediately after an assessment, with the most relevant person, for example the chief invigilator or responsible examiner. If the complaint is of a general nature it can be raised through the PA National Examination sub-committee or, if the complaint is about a member of the examinations staff, with the Chair of the PA National Examination sub-committee or their deputy.

Formal complaints must be received no later than ten working days after the assessment took place. The only exception is when an appeal has been lodged. In these circumstances a complaint must be lodged within ten working days of the date of the decision of the appeal panel.

Formal complaints must be submitted in writing and must include supporting evidence, if available and appropriate. There is no fee for making a complaint.

If a candidate wishes to complain about more than one component of the PA National Examination, a separate complaint must be lodged for each component.

Receipt of the complaint will be acknowledged within ten working days.

Complaints are judged by a complaints panel. The panel will have three members, two of whom will be PA National Examination sub-committee members who were not involved in the original assessment. The third member, who will chair the panel, will be an assessment expert. Panel member may or may not be medically qualified but will have substantial experience of assessment in postgraduate education.

Clarification of the precise nature of the complaint may be sought.

Any individual complained about and/or the person directly responsible for the matter being complained about will be given the opportunity to respond to the complaint.

Further information may be required. The parties will be invited to comment on any information submitted by the other and will be given adequate time to do so.

In taking a decision on whether or not a complaint is justified the complaints panel will act reasonably and objectively, observing the principles of natural justice and will reach a decision on the balance of probabilities.

The decision will be final and communicated to the complainant in writing, with reasons, as soon as is reasonably possible and normally no more than six weeks after receipt of the complaint.

Compliance with diversity legislation

The PA National Examination sub-committee is committed to promoting and developing equality and diversity. It aims to have policies and ways of working that are fair to all individuals and groups.

The PA National Examination sub-committee collects data on PA National Examination applicants and analyses PA National Examination results in relation to equal opportunities monitoring variables.

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