

External Examiner Report

GMC PLAB 2023

Introduction

The Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) is an assessment designed to ensure that doctors who graduated abroad have the right knowledge and skills to practise medicine in the UK. Comprising two parts, part 1 is a written, multiple-choice assessment and part 2, an objective structured clinical exam (OSCE). As part of candidates' eligibility to apply for a licence to practise medicine in the UK, candidates must pass part 1 and 2 of PLAB.

This report focuses on the candidates experience of applying for, sitting and receiving results for part 1 of PLAB.

1. PLAB Part 1

PLAB Part 1 comprises 180 multiple choice questions, where candidates select the single best answer from 5 distractors. The standard test length is 3 hours, equivalent to 60 seconds per question. Each question has a single answer, and no negative marking is applied. The assessment is taken in exam conditions in a test centre. Candidates are provided with a question booklet and optical mark sheet for recording answers. All candidates sit the same paper on a single day and questions are presented in the same order to candidates. Part 1 is offered four times a year, across test centres worldwide. In 2023, 23,500 part 1 places were offered, and 21,916 candidates sat part 1 across sittings offered in February, May, August and November.

1.1 Pre-Application Information

To be eligible to sit PLAB part 1, candidates must have achieved an acceptable overseas primary medical qualification and must demonstrate necessary knowledge of English language. The PLAB website contains clear and comprehensive information on which qualifications and awarding institutions are acceptable for eligibility to sit PLAB and which do not meet the GMCs requirements. Some qualifications are examined for eligibility on a case-by-case basis and are clearly shown on the website. Contact details for enquires are clear and give information on what information potential candidates should supply to allow a faster response to queries. Overseas medical schools are able to request their GMC qualification eligibility review.

Many candidates looking for eligibility will live and work overseas, and many may not have English as a first language. Given the cultural and language differences between candidates, the website contains a very useful glossary list and meaning of subject specific terminology, ensuring candidates can access and understand the given information. Throughout the PLAB website, information is given precisely and formatted clearly for readers. Links are given in relevant places to email contacts where candidates may need help.

1.2 Registration Process

Candidates are required to set up a secure GMC Online account. There are 'how to guides' to help candidates, a trouble shooting guide and links to email contacts if candidates need more help. Information is also given to candidates who may need to update their details. Candidates can securely upload eligibility documents and book and pay for assessments through the portal which contains secure payment facilities. Security measures are in place through the portal to ensure data is secure and meet legal requirements for data privacy and protection. The online portal is also required for candidates to receive their results and feedback to assessments, ensuring all access and information for candidates is in one central location.

Candidates can book a part 1 place, for any assessment location, through their GMC Online account. Booking is open approximately 11 months prior to the assessment period. For example, to sit part 1 on 20th February 2025, places are released on 14 March 2024. Registration opens at different times depending on the test location being booked and this is presented clearly to candidates.

1.3 Accessibility

Additional health needs and reasonable adjustments are well catered for. The process for applying for reasonable adjustments is outlined on the PLAB website along with the evidence and information required for reasonable adjustments to be considered. A contact email link is available for candidates with specific queries. A wide variety of adjustments can be catered for e.g. extra time for candidates with dyslexia or large print for candidates with impaired vision. More complex adjustments can be discussed with candidates on a case-by-case basis.

Fees are described for part 1 and part 2 of PLAB. Improving access to PLAB, refugees granted leave to remain in the UK are eligible for 2 free attempts at part 1, and 2 attempts at part 2 at half fee level. A refugee liaison officer is available to answer queries and for their booking of part 1 and 2 of PLAB.

PLAB part 1 is run over a single day, four times a year in February, May, August and November. There are nine test sites in the UK, 2 in the EU and 21 sites across the rest of the world. To increase accessibility these are spread across continents and in large countries where there are a large number of candidates, numerous venues across the country are available e.g. 6 sites across India. Contact details for venues are clear and include email and telephone contact methods.

Demand for places is monitored closely and where demand exceeds capacity, extra places can be made available in subsequent assessment periods. For example, places sold out quickly in Accra (Ghana), Islamabad and Karachi (Pakistan) in the November 2023 release and so more places were made available in August 2024 and November 2024. These are clearly outlined on the GMC website and have been highlighted via GMC social media channels such as X (Twitter). Monitoring and responding to demand has ensured that more recently, there has been more flexibility in date choice to candidates.

Physical accessibility to venues and facilities is discussed in section 1.5.

1.4 Pre-Test Preparation

Candidates can see the test blueprint and there are links to the reports used to inform the content and design. Candidates can download a user guide that explains the layout of the blueprint and how to use it. Whilst initially the blueprint looks complicated, the main

blueprint links easily across presentations, conditions and domains (including knowledge, skills and performance, safety and quality, communication, partnership and teamwork and maintaining trust) to give candidates a more detailed view of what is expected at Foundation Level in the UK in these domains. To aid the transition of PLAB graduates into the UK workforce, a guide for employers on using the blueprint and expectations of doctors who have passed the PLAB assessment is given.

There are 30 sample questions available to candidates so that they can see the type of questions that they will encounter in the assessment. Correct answers and an explanation pointing candidates to the correct reasoning are available for each question. This is particularly helpful in aiding international medical graduates towards guidelines and references referred to in the NHS/UK delivered medical practice.

Since the assessment is delivered on paper, it might be useful for candidates to be able to download an answer mark sheet so that they can practice answering questions using question banks and aligning to the mark sheet. This would be particularly useful for those candidates who may have dyslexia or dyspraxia who may want to practice ensuring they are aligning questions to the correct line on the mark sheet. Additionally, many candidates may have only had experience of online test delivery, especially since COVID, so will be unfamiliar with ensuring they don't miss a line in the middle of the assessment.

1.5 Test Environment

A variety of venues are used across the UK and overseas. Most overseas venues are run by the British Council. Test centres are based in major cities worldwide and across the nations of the UK, all with good transport links. Minimum requirements of testing centres have been outlined by the GMC. Before a venue is selected as a location for a part 1 assessment, an assessment of a variety of requirements is made, for example accessibility e.g. lifts, disabled access, facilities available and transport to the venue. Once all the checks have been made and satisfied, a venue will be assigned as an assessment centre.

At the start of each assessment diet a checklist is completed regarding centre amenities and comments can be made by invigilators. In addition to centre requirements, desk and chair quality, distance apart and invigilators available per candidate are recorded. Any anomalies are addressed prior to the start of the assessment and issues and recommendations for future assessments made in formal documentation. In addition to centre invigilator checks, since the restrictions on social distancing and travel under COVID have been lifted, assessment leads have made visits to different sites to ensure that quality of standards across testing sites are maintained and experience is equal for candidates regardless of test centre location. **It would be useful in the future to expand this to some of the larger overseas testing centres.**

The invigilation process and running of the assessment observed was excellent. Candidates were welcomed, identity checked and directions to examination rooms given to all candidates in a swift and well organised manner. There were plenty of staff available to answer candidate questions and direct candidates to the correct areas. Candidate ID was checked at multiple points and candidates allocated to a specific desk. Upon check in to their allocated room, candidates were told what they were allowed on their desks and where to store their belongings. There was plenty of space for belongings, rooms were light, airy, well laid out and there was plenty of space. Desks and chairs were comfortable and stable.

Standard operating procedures were clear and followed by the invigilation team. The start time and end time of the assessment was clearly presented across the examination room and clocks were visible from all desks. Candidates with specific requirements were known to invigilators and access requirements were known and confirmed. All instructions were clear and simple to ensure understanding by all candidates. As the assessment was being set up and candidates sat at their desk, the invigilation team were approachable, and queries were dealt with quickly with clear evidence of consistency between candidates and examination rooms. Invigilators quickly resolved issues, for example water bottles/snacks with text/wrappers were removed from desks before the assessment started.

At the start of the assessment the lead invigilator read standardised instructions clearly and simply. Main rules and procedures were outlined and safety requirements, for example fire bell instructions were given.

Throughout the exam, invigilators were swift to respond to questions and noted when candidates left for a toilet break etc, and notes made under standard processes. Time alerts were made at the agreed times towards the end of the assessment so as not to disrupt candidates throughout the assessment. Throughout invigilators also noted the comfort of candidates ensuring temperature control of the room.

At the end of the assessment, invigilators asked for feedback from the candidates by providing a business card containing a QR code to a feedback form. This was an excellent idea as candidates had been sitting in the exam for over 3 hours and could have time to regroup and think before giving feedback. Dates of result release were highlighted to candidates and how they could view their results.

It was clear that throughout, the invigilation team are assessing their performance and the processes and make notes to discuss with the PLAB assessment team on potential improvements to the processes and candidate experience. **For example, they wondered if instructions on a laminate on desks may be useful for candidates to read as they sit down reminding them of no phones in pockets, labels on water bottles etc to stop candidates needing to go back to their bags as invigilators read out instructions just prior to the assessment start.**

The detailed incident report and attendance list is kept by invigilators and shared with the assessment team at PLAB to aid in candidate queries and appeals.

Throughout the assessment, the atmosphere felt relaxed and unhurried and at the end of the assessment candidates looked happy and calm.

1.6 Test Content and Format

Questions were presented to candidates as a question booklet. The paper was of high quality and diagrams and images were clear and of appropriate size. The font was clear and suitable for candidates who may have reading disabilities. The layout of questions was clear and consistent with differentiation between question stem, lead in and distractors. Question numbers and distractor numbers were clear so that candidates could match to the optical mark sheets easily. Candidates name and number were printed on answer sheets, part of the quality assurance that the correct marks were given to the correct candidate. This reduces human error when writing their own number or deciphering handwriting.

It may be useful to have some spare question booklets and answer sheets in case of spilled water for example to ensure the quality of the read out of answers on the optical mark sheet.

The rigorous processes in the writing of questions, question review and standard setting, along with the rigorous psychometric analyses ensure that the assessment diets are comparable and the standard of papers, equal, irrespective of the assessment diet. Questions are clearly set to the required level of the AKT.

Very recently, the assessment team have purchased a new question bank software to manage and store questions and support the development of exam papers. This will help to strengthen the development of new questions, standard setting, emendation of questions and development of exam papers based on the new PLAB blueprint to comply with the AKT requirements of the new Medical Licensing Assessment (MLA). In addition, it has the facility to allow the development of online delivery of AKT papers in the future, aligning with some requests by candidates in feedback.

1.7 Security

The secure processes in undertaking the part 1 assessment ensure fairness to candidates. Part 1 assessments are delivered four times a year, at the same time across the world. To ensure security of the assessment content and ensure sharing of questions cannot occur between candidates in different countries, the time of the assessment is set to ensure that all candidates that sit the assessment will all be in the assessment at a given start time. This means for candidates sitting the assessment in the UK, they will start the assessment in the morning whilst those in Australia may be in the late afternoon.

Question booklets and optical mark sheets were meticulously collected in, in exam conditions. Invigilators counted papers in and out and checks were made against a register to check every candidate marking sheet and question booklet had been collected. Thus, after collection, every candidate answer sheet and question booklet can be matched.

The invigilation team did not leave question booklets or answer sheets unaccompanied at any time. Following collection, the packaging of booklets and sheets was meticulous. The process was clear, followed precisely and ensured packaging of booklets and papers was thorough for the courier. Papers were collected by a quality assured, well known courier service and packages were signed over. The courier signs for delivery to the print and marking supplier.

At all stages of the assessment process, the number of papers and location of papers was accountable, important as there were spare papers from candidates who failed to attend. Processes ensured that all candidates marking scripts were accounted for, ensuring every candidate would get a mark.

1.8 Quality

The print and marking supplier scans the optical mark sheets containing candidate answers. Thorough quality assurance processes have been defined and are followed to identify anomalies for example missing answers or more than one answer for a single question.

Checks against original mark sheets can be performed here if necessary. The list of candidates and their answer choices is aligned to registers of assessment attendance to ensure that all candidates have their answers recorded correctly electronically.

Recorded results are provided securely to the GMC through secure data sharing practices. Thorough psychometric analysis is performed on the results to check for quality of question performance. A number of indices are used to ensure question quality including facility values and discrimination values, to ensure that stronger candidates more often get the

question correct compared to weaker candidates. Distractor analysis identified where the wrong answer is chosen more often by candidates than the correct answer. In these instances, questions are reviewed to ensure they were not worded ambiguously or had more than one possible answer, where two answers may be credited as correct. Decisions are made by a highly trained board who understand question performance and its importance in ensuring a quality exam for candidates and the impact on their results and outcomes. This board applies the pass marks derived by the standard setting groups using a Modified Angoff methodology plus 1 standard error of measurement (SEM). Following psychometric analysis, the print and marking supplier, compile a final mark sheet and outcome file which is sent to the GMC. A second round of quality checks and psychometric analyses are performed. For example, the pass mark, SEM applied and questions included in the total score results are checked and performance is checked against previous diets.

To ensure all candidates who sat the assessment have a result, the candidate list of attendees is checked against the marks spreadsheet. The Applied Knowledge Test (AKT) Board ratify results and results are imported securely to the candidate portal. At all points of import and alignment, checks are made to ensure correct alignment of results and that every student has the correct mark. The standard operating procedures from candidate application, through to result dissemination are thorough and expectations of different teams are clear. The swift processing of results ensures there is time for quality and checking of results, but also ensure candidates receive results at the first opportunity.

1.9 Scoring, Results and Feedback

Candidates can view their results 6 weeks after their assessment date. Results are released via the secure candidate portal. Candidates are given instructions on access arrangements for receiving results, including a virtual queue to ensure the maintenance of server capacity and allow the swift access of results for all candidates.

Candidates receive their mark for the assessment, their outcome (pass/fail), the pass mark and standard error of measurement and average score for the diet. Candidates' results are broken down further for feedback, into 3 skill domains: applying knowledge and experience to clinical practice; good clinical care – assessment; and good clinical care – management.

1.10 Fairness

Candidates are advised on the number of attempts that they can make for part 1 ensuring all candidates have the same number of opportunities to sit the assessments. After four attempts, candidates wanting to sit an additional attempt must provide evidence of further learning, the requirements of which are clearly outlined on the PLAB website. This is based on evidence that shows better outcomes for candidates with more preparation and experience, maximising their chances of passing the assessment.

The appeals process is outlined on the PLAB website and includes grounds of appeal. Candidates are required to submit information as soon as possible after the assessment or within 10 working days of the publication of results. Evidence required and a direct email link are provided to candidates. Clear guidance is given for the type of scenarios where candidates can appeal, for example, procedural irregularities, administration errors or unexpected/exceptional circumstances during the exam. Incidents where invigilators had noted unforeseen disruption to the test environment, for example noise from other

buildings surrounding the venues, were reported back to the assessment team promptly and outcomes and support put in place before candidate appeals.

A team of trained assessors deals with appeals and complaints from around the world. Assessment is made promptly, and outcomes show consistency between cases and fairness to candidates. The number of appeals and complaints is very low for PLAB. The commitment to fairness and high expectations they have on candidate experience is outstanding. To increase fairness to all candidates and ensure the assessment is valid, potential misconduct is taken very seriously. Examples of what would constitute misconduct are outlined clearly to candidates via the PLAB website, along with an overview of the misconduct procedures and penalties. A team of trained assessors investigate suspected misconduct and outcomes are reported quickly. Where investigations have resulted in evidence of misconduct by candidates, these have been dealt with fairly, consistently and clear communication is provided to candidates. Candidates are able to appeal an outcome from investigation of misconduct within 10 days of the decision. The information required to appeal is outlined on the PLAB website and potential outcomes listed. In addition, to increase the fairness of the assessment, results are used to inform changes to assessment processes to ensure it doesn't happen again. There are few incidences of misconduct, however outcomes are fair and consistent.

1.11 Technical Issues

All international candidates' mark sheets are couriered to the UK for processing by the print and marking supplier at the same time as candidates sitting the assessment in the UK. To ensure there are no losses in transit, mark sheets are scanned and stored as a back-up to ensure no data loss. To date this has never been needed given the robust courier procedures, tracking and signing for packages.

Technical issues, such as limited GMC account access due to IT maintenance are communicated, where possible with notice, to candidates.

1.12 Candidate Satisfaction Survey

A lot of work has been done to understand the candidate views of applying for, completing part 1 and receiving results. Surveys have been developed, delivered (May 2023) worldwide, and results compiled and presented at the AKT board in September 2023. Over 2350 candidates were approached to complete the survey, about 50% from each venue worldwide for the May 2023 diet. Over 914 responded and the team have plans to run their survey more regularly post COVID.

Whilst only 43.2% of candidates in the survey managed to book their preferred date of assessment, 70% of candidates were able to book a space at their preferred location (worldwide). In 2023, 21,916 candidates sat part 1 of PLAB from 23,500 assessment places offered, an increase of more than 7,446 candidates who sat part 1 in 2022 (the number of tests offered is slightly higher than this, this numbers includes only candidates who attended the assessment). A similar number of assessment places is expected for 2024.

Over half of the candidates responding found the booking system 'really' or 'somewhat' easy. Candidates commented that the booking system was systematic and well-coordinated and suggested the improvements made since early 2022 through the use of a waiting room system made the process easier. The major concern was the time candidates had to wait in the virtual queue to make their booking.

With the very detailed instructions and information available online for PLAB and part 1, only 30% of candidates needed to contact the GMC before the exam, with candidates outlining the fast response and addressing of concerns. Questions made to the British Council about venues overseas were equally dealt with speed and professionalism. Nearly 70% of candidates used the GMC website for guidance and resources for preparation for the assessment. Some of the free text comments suggested that candidates would like more information on preparation strategies and topics. **To help with this and in line with the AKT, part of the new MLA, run by the Medical Schools Council for undergraduate medical schools, to help align part 1 to their preparation materials, a short example paper could be shared with candidates to help them prepare.**

Satisfaction with the whole process of booking, taking part 1 and receiving results is very high amongst those surveyed. There were some comments suggesting candidates would like to see computer-based delivery for part 1. Logistically, this could be quite challenging. The worldwide delivery, the number of candidates sitting the assessment in any one venue, the requirements for hardware and software to deliver the test, along with robust Wi-Fi and network provision within venues run by external agencies would make this tricky. However, some of the benefits would be image quality for the candidates and the possibility of zooming in of diagrams, reduction in the worry to candidates that they misalign their mark sheet with the question number on the question booklet and easier flagging of questions to come back to, all could, in turn help increase the reliability of results.

1.13 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Much work is being undertaken across all aspects of the PLAB assessment, including part 1 to ensure that the assessment is fair and valid for all candidates. Throughout the assessment design process from question writing, emendation and standard setting there is clear evidence of inclusion of best practice in EDI initiatives. With a global audience, assessment panel members critically review questions across the process to identify and rectify potential bias or stereotypes, ensure inclusive language avoiding colloquialisms ensuring that the final assessment papers are accessible and fair to all candidates.

Detailed psychometric analyses have looked at differential awarding across different demographics, and in test performance across different test locations. This feeds back into the question design/writing processes.

2. Conclusion

Candidate experience and satisfaction with the PLAB part 1 assessment is very high. From initial registration to delivery of results, candidate experience is at the fore of the assessment. The detailed processes ensuring the quality of questions, blueprinting of content and comprehensive use of psychometric data ensure that papers are valid and produce reliable results, help towards candidates gaining fair results.

Information given on the PLAB website and instructions to candidates are always clear, unambiguous and offer the answers to the most common questions. Where more detailed information may be required there are clear contact points to sources of information, both in the UK and overseas. Queries are dealt with promptly, with professionalism and provide satisfactory information to the candidates.

In the assessment centres, the comfort of the candidates is key, ensuring their optimal performance. There are sufficient staff at venues to ensure that assessments run smoothly,

and candidates don't have to worry about how to do anything. They can focus on the assessment.

The smiles and calm environment amongst candidates after the assessment in Manchester, the satisfaction shown in the candidate survey and the low number of appeals and complaints worldwide are due to the high-quality experiences of the candidates due to the robust and detailed processes in place for the assessment and high quality delivery by all members of the assessment team.

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