

## Intercollegiate Committee for Basic Surgical Examinations (ICBSE)

### A Guide for Assessors in the Intercollegiate MRCS OSCE Examination

January 2016 (Updated March 2017)

#### 1. Introduction

The Surgical Royal Colleges are responsible for ensuring that its Members and Fellows enter the profession with the highest possible standards of competence in the interest of patients. Examiners have the pivotal role of evaluating Candidates' knowledge and ensure that those who deserve to pass the examination do so and that those who do not reach the standard are not allowed to go forward.

An OSCE examination of a professional subject is a huge undertaking and has many complexities. The purpose of this Guide is to help Assessors to understand their roles and responsibilities. It is meant to be a pragmatic and practical guide. The aim is to place it in the public domain so that Candidates can also see how the examination process is scrutinised.

#### 2. Standard and Purpose of the OSCE

The standard of the OSCE is set at the ST1/ST2 level, although Candidates below or above this stage in their careers may apply. The OSCE has been designed to represent common situations arising in the day of an ST1/ST2 trainee. The expectation of Examiners is to explore how Candidates apply knowledge, skills, judgement and behaviour in day to day practise using Miller's educational pyramid at the level of "Shows How".

#### 3. An Overview of the Roles and Responsibilities of Assessors

Assessors are appointed by the Chairman of Internal Quality Assurance Committee (IQA) in consultation with the Deputy Chairman of IQA and the Chairman of ICBSE. The role of the Assessor is to evaluate the performance of the Examiner and the examination as a whole, and to offer immediate and supportive feedback with positive suggestions for improvement where necessary. Assessors evaluate all aspects of the examination including scenarios, props, Candidate and Examiner briefing, utility of examination, documentation, Examiner/lay Examiner/patient/actor behaviour, pre-exam preparation, questioning and marking. Assessors are to act as mentors for new Examiners and lay Examiners to help them build confidence and develop into the role, also to provide support and constructive feedback to examination centers and Examiners. Based on the evidence acquired, Assessors make recommendations for improvement to the examination to IQA on the forms referred to in 8.2. These forms are provided for the purpose of identifying problems with Examiner behaviour, scenarios, utility and administration, and are designed to report problems by exception only.

Assessors must not be serving ICBSE Examiners during their term as Assessors and should maintain independence of College affiliations (see the Person Specification of Assessors with the Terms of Reference – Appendix A).

#### 4. **Basic Principles of Assessment**

- A minimum one Assessor should visit each venue at each diet
- Each College is to be visited by more than one Assessor during a diet
- Each Assessor to attend at least 2 days in each diet, in different venues
- Candidates and Examiners should be informed of the presence and work of the Assessors in the candidate and examiner briefings.

#### 5. **Before Examination**

The host Centre should prepare a pack to help the Assessors' work at least one week in advance. The pack should include:

- All scenarios of the day
- Program of the day
- OSCE Structure and Matrix
- Name of lead administrator and Supervising Examiner
- Examiner mark sheets
- Assessor evaluation forms
- Assessors' Guidance
- Names, numbers, specialty and starting date of Examiners and their allocation (so as to let the Assessors know if the Examiners are experienced or new)
- Copy of Syllabus

#### 6. **During Examination**

Assessors should attend the Candidate and Examiner briefings where possible and observe Examiner preparation. The Colleges should inform Candidates and Examiners of the presence and work of the Assessors, emphasising that they are not taking part in the evaluation of Candidates' performance.

- *Are the Candidate and Examiner briefing and instructions adequate?*

During the examination the Assessors should not interfere in any way in the course of the examination. Using the forms provided, Assessors should evaluate each Examiner and discuss strengths and weaknesses with the Examiner concerned at the next break point.

Immediate, serious concerns regarding any aspect of the examination or Examiner behaviour should be drawn to the attention of the Supervising Examiner or lead administrator as soon as it is possible. The Supervising Examiner should observe the Examiner in question and be left to make their own judgement as to whether intervention is required.

- *It is not the role of the Assessor to intervene in the behaviour of a particular Examiner there and then.*

#### 7. **Points of Assessment**

Assessors should be able to pick *any bays* for observation on the day of the examination. Assessors should be familiar with the examination structure and should be able to visit stations and be confident that individual Examiners are staying to the specific script of the scenario and are clearly familiar with the material. Assessors should be able to review marks given in a station they have observed once the marks have been written down. Although it is not at all reasonable for Assessors to suggest alterations to the marks, they might annotate and later give feedback to Examiners, when there is a discrepancy

between the Assessor's and the Examiner's evaluation regarding a particular Candidates' performance.

Following extensive discussion about the design and usage of the evaluation forms it was agreed that there should be two forms:

- **Utility and Scenario**  
to evaluate the venue and utility of the examination (only one such to be completed per Assessor per venue). This form also has the ability to capture comments on the scenarios that are fed back to the Broad Content Area Leads.
- **Examiner**  
to evaluate each Examiner assessed in each station. This is a spread sheet which maps out the examiners, the station they are examining and scenario at that station. If an Examiner changes station the spread sheet needs to be altered accordingly.

In all cases the evaluation should be based on 'exception reporting'.

### **Appropriateness of scenarios**

The OSCE scenarios are set by members of individual committees working in different areas of the examination. Committees are made up of experts who scrutinise questions that are submitted by Examiners. They are intended to comply with a template and are edited by professional editors. It is important to assess whether the content of the questions comply with the range of knowledge, skills and professionalism described in the written curriculum. Only topics covered in the curriculum can be used in the examination. If the questions contain material that are regarded as out with the curriculum or only marginally related to it, the Assessors might question whether this is a valid OSCE question. It must always be possible to match the questions to the written syllabus. The examination setters have an obligation to ensure that it is clear where particular questions fit to the overall examination blueprint.

Because the OSCE is a complex examination and been drawn from a number of expert groups, it might be possible that within a certain diet multiple questions cover the same topic within the curriculum might occur. Equally, other areas of the syllabus may not be adequately sampled. (It is of course not possible to cover the syllabus completely within an examination; any one diet is a sequence of samples across the range of the curriculum.) Covering the same topic multiple times within the same exam should only be done to allow Examiners to assess different skills within similar settings.

The essential role of the examination setters is to sample across the broad width of the curriculum

- *The Assessors are asked to scrutinise the paper to ensure that there are no significant overlaps in terms of knowledge or practical content; equally, significant gaps should be pointed out.*

Attendance at the OSCE assumes that the Candidate had passed Part A MCQ. Part A is purely a test of knowledge. In question setting it is very easy asking Candidates to recall factual information; however this is the domain of the MCQ and not the OSCE.

The OSCE format allows the testing of higher order of thinking. The aim and objective of this examination is to test the “Shows How” element of Miller’s pyramid ([https://www.med.qub.ac.uk/osce/background\\_What.html](https://www.med.qub.ac.uk/osce/background_What.html)). It is important that examination setters and question writers try and avoid excessive factual recall and aim to test interpretation and application of knowledge within the context of simulated scenarios - which are most appropriate for the OSCE setting.

- *If Assessors feel that significant elements of a question are simply factual recall, they might suggest that the question should be used in the Part A MCQ, rather than the OSCE.*

It may well be (and this has been a frequent comment from Candidates) that the overall content of a question can be somewhat challenging in terms of the available time. In some stations when questions are known to be complex, extra time is provided for Candidates in the form of a 9 minute preparation station. This is the case in some communication stations, for example. However, within a routine OSCE station the information content of a station should not be more than what can be appropriately processed within the available time. Candidates should not be exposed to excessive time pressure - although they might be asked to make judgements and reach decisions reasonably promptly. In general, however, the scenarios must be constructed in a way that the questions can be answered comfortably within the allocated time.

- *If Assessors believe that the time allocation for the questions in a station are not matched they should point this out.*

### **Appropriateness of Venue and Facilities**

Although venues are generally held in Colleges there is an increasing trend to revert back to clinical settings, so that real patients and real pathologies can be demonstrated. There are limitations to this, particularly in the Anatomy stations where legally licensed anatomical premises or personnel are required to be available. The arrangement of the stations, however, could be adjusted such that a reasonably realistic clinical setting may be provided for certain stations and a lab or non-clinical area could be allocated for some of the basic science questions. The examination tends to break down fairly naturally into two parts along these lines.

It is important, however, that venues are reasonably consistent and should be free from the risk of interruption through day-to-day activities, such as ones involved in clinical practice.

- Assessors should have very clear opinions as to whether the venue is fair. They should note on the Utility and Scenario evaluation form provided in particular:
  - If the lighting is adequate
  - If the room is at a comfortable working temperature, neither too hot nor too cold
  - If each area is sufficiently sound proofed
  - If the route from station to station clearly marked and the areas at waiting points suitably secure
  - If good seating, appropriate accessories and prescribed props available in the rooms for Examiners and Candidates
  - If the timing of the examination has been kept

### **Appropriateness of Administration**

Candidates can expect to have an appropriate professional environment where they can be received politely and dealt with in sufficient privacy. Candidates should be able to sit comfortably while waiting; there should be catering available and for the breaks good practice might be to provide light refreshments as well. There should be secure places provided for the Candidates' personal property, particularly mobile telephones.

- *It should be clear to Assessors that Candidates are being treated with appropriate respect and politeness.*

It would be reasonable for Assessors to liaise and possibly spend some time with the administrative team to feel assured that the administrative conduct of the examination has been of a high standard of vigilance.

- *Has the exam been appropriately staffed? Is the staff helpful, well informed and courteous?*

### **Appropriateness of Examiners**

Examiners are committed professionals, giving up valuable time to contribute to the standards they expect from colleagues wishing to enter their profession. However they have a duty of care to meet a clear job description of their roles and responsibilities, including:-

- a. Examiners must conform to the script of the highly structured OSCE questions.
- b. Examiners should be courteous and polite to their professional Candidates.
- c. The Examiners should only provide prompting in accordance with ICBSE guidelines and avoid giving feedback beyond what might be required to continue a polite dialogue.
- d. The marking of individual Examiners should be seen to be fair.

Examiners like to know if they are performing well, as well as any deficiencies noted. The Examiner spread sheet allows the Assessors to mark examiners as 'satisfactory, 'unsatisfactory or 'not assessed' without further comment. Any deficiencies of Examiner behaviour should be specified in the space provided. When 'satisfactory' assessors can also highlight areas where the examiner's performance was deemed exemplary.

For the afternoon session Assessors should focus their attention on those examiners who were highlighted in the morning as requiring improvement. In addition, the Colleges should highlight the new examiners (those that have examined on three or less occasions) on the Assessor spreadsheet and these examiners should be assessed further in the afternoon with additional feedback provide where required. On occasions, there will be exams where the examiner group are experienced and performing well and at these exams the afternoon session can be utilised to assess the scenarios in more detail.

Assessors are encouraged to write their comment in the second person so they can be relayed directly back via the examiner feedback documentation.

### **New Examiners**

All new Examiners will have been trained; the Assessors should help new Examiners to settle in their role. These new Examiners should be visited by Assessors and be singled out to receive early feedback.

- *Assessors should make a point of meeting new Examiners and observe them performing in stations. They should look to provide supportive feedback wherever possible and always provide overall feedback on their examination performance on that day.*
- *As mentioned, new examiners should be assessed further in the afternoon and additional feedback provided where required.*

### **8. After the Examination**

Assessors should be prepared to provide feedback to individual Examiners and to the supervising Examiner. There will be times in the day including short periods at lunch breaks so not invading rest time too much when individual Examiners who have been observed by Assessors can receive feedback. There is also time at the end of the OSCE while the exam marks are being compiled, and before Examiners are able to leave, when further feedback can be provided.

- *In the feedback sessions it is important that Assessors provide positive feedback as well as negative feedback and to give examples of good and rare bad practice. The Assessors should use as much objective evidence as possible when providing feedback.*

### **9. Reporting**

Assessors should finish observation before the end of the last circuit, to compare notes and discuss issues of the day. Assessors should return their completed assessment forms to the examinations staff and submit a report within 10 working days with recommendations to the ICBSE Manager. The ICBSE Manager will submit the collated data and reports to the Chair of the Assessor Group, who will present the data to IQA. IQA will give feedback to the Colleges, to ICBSE and to relevant ICBSE sub groups.

### **10. Attending the Standard Setting Exercise**

The standard setting exercise is performed by the administrative team and the support statistical staff. This is an objective exercise with clearly written rules.

- *The Assessors reports play a factor in the standard setting process. Occasionally, questions may well have to be ruled out because of aberrant performance of the question.*
- *The Lead Assessor will attend the IQA meetings and the minutes for each are available to all Assessors upon request.*

(NB: a note on the OSCE Standard Setting process is included in Appendix B)

## ICBSE Assessor - Duties and Terms of Reference

### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 To monitor, evaluate and provide feedback on the conduct and performance of ICBSE appointed examiners in all components of the MRCS held in UK and overseas centres, to ensure that the highest possible standards of examining are achieved and maintained.
- 1.2 To act as guardians of standards for the intercollegiate examinations over time and across examination venues.
- 1.3 To enhance the professional experience of examiners by encouraging reflective practice.
- 1.4 To act as mentors for new examiners and lay examiners to help them build confidence and develop into the role.
- 1.5 To assist in the review of the assessments used to enhance the comparability, validity and reliability of the examinations.

### 2. Functions/ Responsibilities

The duties of the Assessor are to undertake the following activities and to make recommendations for improvement if appropriate:

- 2.1 Monitor and evaluate the conduct and performance of ICBSE appointed examiners including their consistency in the interpretation and application of mark descriptors in accordance with guidelines established by IQA.
  - 2.1.1 Monitor Equality and Diversity issues in accordance with the ICBSE policy.
- 2.2 Provide support and constructive feedback to examiners.
- 2.3 Identify and disseminate good practice.
- 2.4 Provide support and guidance to Examination Supervisors in the conduct of the examination and, in exceptional circumstance or emergencies where the running of the examination is placed in jeopardy, to participate as an examiner at the discretion of the Supervising Examiner.
- 2.5 Gather feedback on the administration, structure, content and conduct of examinations in discussion with candidates, administrators and examiners.
- 2.6 Based on the evidence acquired as Assessor, to make recommendations for improvement to the examination to IQA.

### 3. Tasks in support of the purpose

- 3.1 Attend examinations as appointed by IQA.

- 3.2 Observe all examiners where feasible, at least once at each exam session.
- 3.3 Provide individual feedback to examiners as soon as possible with positive suggestions for improvement where required.
- 3.4 Report all instances where the integrity of the examination is at risk to the Supervising Examiner as soon as possible.
- 3.5 Act as external evaluator of the venue, organisation and overall conduct of the examination.
- 3.6 In the performance of the above tasks maintain confidentiality and professional integrity.
- 3.7 Complete all relevant documentation as agreed by IQA.
- 3.8 Provide a written report after each examination to the Lead Assessor.

#### **4. Person Specification for Assessors**

- 4.1 Medical assessors must have served as Examiners for a Royal College for a minimum of three years as clinicians or examiners in the basic sciences and have demonstrated good examiner technique and practice.
- 4.2 Assessors must not be serving ICBSE Examiners during the appointment and term of office of Assessor.
- 4.3 In the performance of the duties of Assessor, maintain independence of College affiliations.
- 4.4 On retirement from clinical practice assessors must be in good standing with their regulatory body. Once licensing is introduced into UK practice, retired Examiners who have been licensed will be expected to have had a current licence on retirement. It is not necessary to have a licence to practice to act as an assessor. It is also not necessary to maintain membership of the GMC or Irish Medical Council.

#### **5. Appointment and Selection Process**

- 5.1 Applicants must be nominated by one of the Royal Surgical Colleges of the UK or Ireland and complete and submit the relevant application form. Two references will be required. One from a current or (if not employed) most recent employer, the other from the nominating Surgical College. Assessors will be expected to be in good standing with their Regulatory Organisation and not subject to limitations on their practice or investigation into their conduct.
- 5.2 Appointments will be made by the Chairman of IQA in consultation with the Deputy Chairman of IQA, the Lead Assessor and the Chairman of ICBSE
- 5.3 Appointments will be subject to the satisfactory completion of a mandatory training programme. Assessors will be required to attend further annual meetings of continuing professional development relevant to their role as

may be determined by IQA. This will include Equality and Diversity training.

5.4 Following training, Assessors will be required to complete satisfactorily a one year probation period.

#### **6. Term of office**

Following satisfactory completion of the probationary period Assessors may serve for a further three years, with an option of extension for two further two year periods up to a maximum of eight years. Assessors may serve no more than eight years including the probationary period.

**Date of approval: July 2013 (updated January 2016)**

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**EXTRACT FROM 2013-14 ANNUAL REPORT DESCRIBING THE OSCE  
STANDARD SETTING PROCESS**

**Standard Setting from February 2013**

Each standard setting meeting continues to begin with an analysis of the level of discrimination and facility of each of the circuits and their constituent stations, including a review of candidate, examiner and Assessor feedback, to ensure consistency and comparability of demand.

Each candidate's performance on each of the examined stations continues to be assessed in two ways:

- a mark is awarded using a structured mark sheet containing assessment criteria for each content area and for each assessed domain;
- an holistic judgement is given using one of the categories: pass, borderline or fail. **This is a change from the previous arrangement of pass, borderline pass, borderline fail and fail.**

The following information is therefore available for each candidate:

- a total mark for each station;
- a category result for each station i.e. pass, borderline, fail;
- a total mark for the OSCE;
- a total mark for each of the now two combined BCAs, described by the shorthand, 'Knowledge' and 'Skills'.

The borderline regression method of standard setting is used to determine the contribution of each station to the pass mark. These contributions are summed to give a notional pass mark for each of Knowledge and Skills.

The review of the OSCE carried out in 2012 had concluded that using the borderline regression method and adding 0.5 Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) to each broad content area pass mark retained the previous rigour. This position had been accepted by the GMC, as was the recognition that the ICBSE would retain some flexibility in the multiple of the SEM to be used based on an evaluation of all of the available evidence.

The experience of the first examination conducted under the revised rules (that of February 2013) was that the addition of 0.5 SEM to each of Knowledge and Skills did not maintain the previous standard and it was agreed that the multiple to be used should be 0.84 SEM. It was further agreed that the addition of 0.84 SEM should remain the default position until evidence suggested that it should be changed, and this figure has been used in all subsequent examinations. It may be noted that, because both Knowledge and Skills have to be passed at the same sitting, the SEM for the OSCE as a whole may be considered to be in excess of the 1.0 value widely accepted as the desirable minimum.

To safeguard the interests of patients, and as a driver to learning, it is a requirement for passing the OSCE that candidates must achieve a minimum level of competence in each broad content area at the same examination.