

Specialty Training in Occupational Medicine

Questions and Answers

Question & Answer Sheet 1: All about Workplace-based Assessments

This is one in a series of Question & Answer Sheets prepared by the Faculty of Occupational Medicine to explain changes afoot in relation to the new curriculum for higher specialist training of occupational physicians. (A library of information sheets is being assembled on the Faculty website.)

Q1: What are Workplace-Based Assessments? Why are they needed?

A1: So-called “workplace-based assessments” (WBAs) are a new component of the specialist training programme in occupational medicine. Traditionally, the assessment of trainees has given most emphasis to written examinations – tests of what a person *knows*, rather than what they *actually do* in real practice. Written examinations will continue, but WBAs are being added, as on-the-job assessments of day-to-day performance. Because they are on-the-job, they are locally conducted, mostly by trainees’ supervisors.

They are required by the regulator of postgraduate medical training, the Postgraduate Medical Education and Training Board (PMETB), and are an element of the officially approved assessment system for specialist training in occupational medicine.

The Faculty has been developing several kinds of WBA:

- **The Mini-CEX (Clinical Evaluation Exercise)** involves sitting in on, and scoring a trainee’s consultation with a patient;
- **Multi-source feedback (MSF)** is a form of questionnaire-based 360 degree appraisal;
- **Case-based discussion (CBD)** requires trainers and trainees to discuss a selection of cases and trainers to score the trainee’s performance against a pre-specified range of competencies;
- **Sheffield Assessment Instrument for Letters (SAIL(OH))** is a tool for assessing the quality of a trainee’s correspondence to managers and health professionals;
- **Directly observed procedures (DOPS)** marks the trainee’s ability to perform commonly required procedures [this is currently the least developed of the current crop of tools].

These tools are formative assessments, conducted on several occasions through training, in order to help with developing a trainee’s abilities.

Q2: How do they relate to previous approaches to teaching and assessment?

A2: Informally, trainers have already been conducting WBAs under the old syllabus. For example, most supervisors will have sat in on a sample of their trainees' consultations, discussed problem cases with them, checked over a sample of their correspondence, made sure they can perform everyday clinical procedures correctly, and helped them plan a portfolio, recording a set of learning experiences and objectives. These are WBAs. The old curriculum encouraged such activities; the new system formalises this, encouraging a more systematic approach to their conduct, recording and use.

Q3: What is their main purpose?

A3: WBAs are being introduced primarily as **an educational aid** to trainees and trainers. The focus is on reviewing what is going well, what could be improved upon, and what practical actions should follow on. Again it is imagined that this happens, or should happen, anyway, in trainer-trainee dialogue – WBAs provide a focal point for such reviews. They encourage more dialogue, more regular feedback, and provide one focus for educational planning.

They are also a vehicle for checking on certain important competencies that are hard to measure in other ways eg, professional behaviour, probity, team working. (These are likely to be measured imperfectly, but nonetheless are an important focus of training.)

In the jargon of educationalists, their main function is therefore **formative** - *to support teaching and learning* through directed feedback.

Q4: They are called 'assessments' – aren't they a kind of examination?

A4: Not really. Not in the sense that the Faculty's formal written examinations and the marked research dissertation are examinations. These last groups are **summative assessments** – relatively high stake pass-fail tests. But WBAs are not like a formal examination. They are mainly used as educational tools by trainers and trainees.

Q5: Are there any circumstances in which they could lead to a failure to progress, or a decision to remove a trainee from specialist training (ie, may they sometimes be used in a summative way)?

A5: Yes, but only in instances where performance is consistently and clearly poor.

The instructions emphasise that no-one will be failed on the outcome of a given WBA. Rather, summaries of the outcomes of a large number of WBAs, together with a trainer's report, are submitted to the Annual Review of Competence Progression panel (ARCP – formerly RITA) as part of the annual review. Thus, WBAs will be

considered alongside all the other evidence that RITA panels have traditionally employed – it is simply extra information.

The use made of this element of the information will ultimately rest with the ARCP panel. But consistently poor performance in a given area might lead to dialogue about remedial training, with or without an extension to the duration of training. In cases of consistently poor performance across a range of important competencies, it might even lead to a decision not to endorse progression. The authority lies with the ARCP panel and so does the discretion to investigate circumstances (eg, reasons for poor apparent performance) and remedial options, which may need to be implemented by the Programme Director and regional deanery.

Similarly, at an earlier stage in the process, educational supervisors may reasonably expect trainees to work on specific weaknesses, flagged up by WBAs as requiring remedial attention, and to show improvement over repeat assessments. WBAs will also be used in meetings with the educational supervisor to help mould the educational programme throughout the year. Thus, for the most part, they will enhance the value of the learning experience rather than being a barrier to progression.

It should be stressed that consistently poor performance is likely to be the exception rather than the rule. In such circumstances dialogue between trainer, trainee and ARCP panel will be required; such discussions should occur *less* often if trainees receive regular feedback as they go along, and will be easier and more constructive in the context of specific concerns.

WBAs should not be seen as threatening, high-stake examinations, but as a good learning opportunity!

Q6: How will WBAs be used in future?

A6: The way that WBAs will be used in the future is still developing, though they may take on greater importance as summative tools of assessment, as well as being aids to education. However, we need more experience of these tools, more evidence on their use in practice, more knowledge of their reliability and potential for measurement error at the margins, etc before giving emphasis to their summative potential in a high stakes pass-fail system. The Faculty intends working with other Colleges to develop and assess WBAs further.

Any change of policy in their use will be advertised well in advance to trainees, trainers, ARCP panels and local STCs.

Q7: What training will I, as a trainer, get in conducting WBAs?

A7: At present the resources to train assessors are limited. Full web-based support and instructions will be provided by the Faculty, with the intention that assessors are self-taught and follow the on-line instructions. This is the model used in Foundation Training, where WBAs are widely used; it is cost-effective given the many parties who will act as assessors (eventually at least 150, representing the current number of trainers).

In future we hope that academic centres may offer courses to 'train the trainer' in WBAs and we encourage such training, as and when it becomes available. However, it should be recognized that full formal training will give rise to costs that may need to be borne by deaneries or training posts (the PMETB has identified no new funds to support wide scale and on-going training).

Q8: (i) Surely assessors in WBAs need to be trained, like Faculty examiners? (ii) Also, aren't these assessments very subjective?

A8:

(i) Assessors in WBAs are not 'examiners' as WBAs are **not** designed to be high-stake summative (pass/fail) examinations. If they were, then they would need to be treated as formal Faculty examinations, and all trainers would become Faculty examiners. They would need to be specifically trained, approved, monitored and audited, and would need periodic refresher training, re-approval etc. They would need to work from centrally generated sets of detailed prescriptive rules, aimed at improving their consistency relative to other 'examiners'. Eventually such training and evaluation would need to occur on a wide scale. Experience suggests that even if all trainers attended training and there was resource and time for this, there would still be some variations of scoring between assessors adjudging the same material. As well as being resource intensive, the summative approach would have other limitations. Prescriptive and detailed sets of instructions and standards would be hard to write, voluminous to read and absorb, and arbitrary – as on-the-job assessment needs to reflect the job in question and could vary in ways that are hard to pre-judge in generating central rules.

Because WBAs are *formative* (tools to assist learning and as a moderate extension of current training provisions) the position is simpler – eg, strictures that arise in quality-assuring a summative pass/fail standard can be loosened, there is less need for standardisation, detailed training, and long sets of instructions; the need for resource-intensive support measures is reduced; and as already mentioned, the threat of failure for the trainee should be supplanted by the opportunity of structured learning.

Having said this, there is still a need for clear instructions, Faculty back up, further developmental work, and practice and familiarity with the tools; and the first WBAs are likely to be developmental rather than perfect tools.

The Faculty is appointing a new group of assessors, called External Assessors of WBAs, and, as these are Faculty appointments, the Faculty will provide specific training. At first we expect to have one such assessor in each deanery. Their role will be **to help the Faculty develop the tools**, and check implementation, by assessing a sample of each trainee's WBAs a second time. (The findings of these extra WBAs will be made available to the ARCP panel as additional information, but should not be considered "more correct" than other information the ARCP receives.)

(ii) WBAs will require trainers to judge performance, and there is inherent subjectivity in the process, as with any other judgment (eg, interviewing or writing a reference). However, WBAs do not really change this situation. Trainers (and ARCP panelists) often exercise professional judgment in advising the trainees on their needs and performance (eg, in leading tutorials, conducting appraisals, and writing reports) – this has always been a part and parcel of training.

The Faculty will provide descriptors of good, average and below average performance to support the process. Such descriptors cannot be wholly comprehensive or prescriptive, and will not remove the need for judgment. However, the focus in WBAs should be on a common-sense constructive view of performance. The aim is to offer flexible on-the-job training, not to conduct an examination or construct a straight jacket!

Q9: What is the timetable for implementation?

A9: Several types of the WBAs were piloted in July and August 2007, with further piloting and a stakeholders' familiarization meeting planned for December 2007. The WBA development team will also grant key stakeholders web access to the drafts over the next few weeks and will consult on them.

Probably, the first WBAs will be introduced in the autumn of 2007 and will be used *only by trainees following the new syllabus.*

Further announcements and a more precise timetable will follow. (Until then, take no special action.)

Your feedback is important

WBAs are at a developmental stage. As with any new system, it will take time to build familiarity and to optimize their content, delivery and application.

The Faculty will monitor implementation and we encourage user feedback. Please relax, try the new tools when you get the chance, and let us know what you think!

Faculty of Occupational Medicine
6 St Andrews Place
Regent's Park
London
NW1 4LB
0207 317 5890
www.facocmed.ac.uk

October 2007