Progress against recommendations

The Review Panel made a total of 12 recommendations to address the issues identified surrounding the January Part 2 MRCOG results error.

Colin Duncan, who took up post as Chair of the Examination and Assessment Committee in May 2018, and Gary Waltham, Executive Director of Development, who took on executive responsibility for the RCOG examinations function immediately following identification of the results error, also carried out an internal review. They came to many of the same conclusions about the work needed to improve the examinations function at the College, and set out below the progress we have made against the Review Panel’s recommendations.

The numbering of the recommendations matches the numbering within the Review Panel’s report, for ease of cross-referencing.

Recommendations

6.1 In order to provide the focus and capacity required for the management of the exams function, the panel would recommend that consideration is given to splitting the Head of Exams role into its two component parts and appointing to a director level role with overall responsibility for exams supported by a strong operational manager at Head of Exam level. The director role should be filled by someone with experience and a good understanding of education and assessment principles and how they apply to an exams function. This would ensure appropriate focus and support of both operational and strategic activity.

The College has approved our proposal to create a new, senior Director of Examinations and Assessments role who will lead the RCOG examinations function from a more strategic perspective. The appointee started at the College on 1 October, and joins us with 15 years’ experience in large, global examinations. This role will be supported by a Head of Examinations, who will be responsible for the operational management of RCOG exams.

6.2 It is important to recruit permanent staff into the exams team as quickly as possible and support their development to effective performance through a structured induction and training process. Given the experience of candidates affected by the results issue incident, the panel would recommend the induction and training process included awareness raising of the wider training process to build understanding and empathy, most usefully by hearing direct from a trainee.

We have now made permanent appointments to all substantive roles within the examinations team structure, most of whom are already in post with recruitment underway to fill the remaining vacancies. We have also retained some additional temporary staff to provide the capacity and space needed to thoroughly induct all new staff, as well as to support implementation of the Expert Review Panel recommendations. All new appointees have been or will go through a robust induction process in line with College HR procedures, and we are also developing a standard induction and training programme for all future new appointments. We have also carried out a number of staff training days, which have included examinations IT systems, customer service and examination mark sheet scanning.

6.3 The panel strongly recommend that all the processes and procedures required to undertake exams administration is fully captured at both a high level and a detailed level, both to ensure operational activity is effectively carried out and to allow for appropriate oversight. This will also mitigate the risk associated with loss of experience through staff turnover.

The examinations team has begun comprehensive work on developing process maps and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for RCOG exams. This includes procedures for managing late entry applications when agreed in exceptional circumstances. The first set has now been fully documented, with the team on track to complete this
work for all College exams by the end of 2018. From 2019 onwards, development and refinement of these process maps and SOPs will become part of the examinations team’s standard annual work plan.

6.4 The review panel were unable to produce a risk profile for the exam because of the lack of information available. We would recommend such a profile is produced and used to inform the development of a quality assurance framework for the examination. The requirements of the quality assurance framework should be embedded within processes and procedures where appropriate.

We have developed a risk management framework which will be rolled out in October 2018. The framework incorporates a risk register for each of the College’s exams, which is linked to an overall risk register for the whole examinations department. There is also a clear process in place for serious risks to be escalated to the College’s organisational and corporate risk registers, which are ultimately overseen by the RCOG Audit and Risk Committee. The Executive Director for Development is responsible for reporting risks related to the exams to the Audit and Risk Committee, and for providing assurance about actions being taken to mitigate those risks.

We have also developed quality assurance processes for each exam, with a particular focus on the process for generating, checking and communicating results, which have been used for all examinations since March 2018. These processes will evolve as the examinations team develops new processes.

6.5 The tools for effective annual planning and individual exam diet planning are available within the exam department and these should be used as an active part of the planning and monitoring process.

We have developed annual plans for the College examinations function for 2018 to 2020. There is also a project plan for each individual exam, which maps out key dates and milestones. Senior examinations department staff use these plans to monitor performance and progress against timescales, which supports the identification of any risks and resulting mitigation should procedural delays emerge,

6.6 It is important to introduce a formal risk management process within exams, overseen and monitored by the examination and assessment committee with appropriate risks escalated to the wider College risk management as necessary.

As set out under recommendation 6.4, we have put in place a new risk management framework, which includes clear processes for escalation to the College’s Audit and Risk Committee.

6.7 Any process is subject to failure and error and so it is vital risk is effectively managed and processes are continually improved and made more robust. A common management tool to help embed a continuous improvement culture is to adopt a formal reflective lessons learned process and the panel recommend the adoption of such a process in the exams department.

After each exam since [March 2018], we have held a lessons learned meeting between senior staff in the examinations team and the Examinations and Assessment Committee. These meetings have already led us to make a number of improvements this year. We will now be widening participation in these meetings and formalising how we capture the lessons learned and actions taken.

6.8 The initial response from RCOG to the incident and the initial communications could have been better co-ordinated and clearer. When the senior executive team took responsibility for managing the incident, the response and support to affected candidates improved significantly. To be more prepared in case of any future incident, the panel recommend an incident management process for exams is introduced which aligns with any College wide incident management process.
The examinations team and our communications teams will be working together to co-develop an incident management process, which will be in place by the end of 2018.

6.9 The results determination process relies on IT systems which are complicated by the need to hold multiple copies of data in different places and the need to transfer data a number of times during the process, both of which are sources of the introduction of error. These processes should be reviewed and developed to simplify wherever possible and to establish the best systems/software to support the process.

The College has approved significant investment in our exams IT infrastructure to address the issues noted in the Expert Review Panel report, and to ensure our systems are up-to-date and meet the expectations of exam candidates and those involved in running the exams. The project target is to have a new system implemented for early 2020. In the interim, senior staff from the examinations and IT teams have worked together to document and streamline processes using existing systems, including the testing of interim processes. Since March 2018, we have also implemented a number of quality assurance steps to mitigate against the potential for human error.

6.10 It is important that administrative exams staff and clinicians supporting the exam recognise and value the important contribution both make to ensure high standards of exam delivery. It is vital both constituents work well together. This can be aided by ensuring both understand their role in the process and the examinations and assessment committee have clear and appropriate oversight of activity.

We both believe that there is now, once again, a very close working relationship between the Examinations and Assessment Committee, the various examinations sub-committees and staff working in the examinations department, with an increasing sense of mutual trust and collaboration. The work undertaken to develop and document annual plans, standard operating systems, risk management frameworks and lessons learned meetings has all helped to support this positive relationship.

6.11 It would be prudent to ensure a senior member of the examinations team is in the office on the day of results release and to consider releasing results on an earlier day in the week to avoid delays in dealing with any enquiry that might arise.

For all exams that have taken place since March 2018, all senior staff in the examinations team, including the Executive Director, have been present for the preparation and issuing of results, supported by the IT department, with the Executive Director responsible for giving sign-off to proceed with releasing results. These arrangements will now continue as standard. Since March 2018, results have been issued on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, and again this will now be our standard practice.

6.12 It is important to restore trust and confidence in the RCOG examination administration process. Publishing the cause of the error together with details of preventative actions would be a useful first step.

The College has published the report in full, with a small number of redactions to remove personally identifiable information, alongside our progress to date against the recommendations. We very much hope that this provides assurance about the work we have already done to ensure our systems and processes are as robust as possible, and the future work we have planned. We will provide further updates as our work progresses.

Should you have any questions or comments about our work to implement the recommendations, please contact us by emailing Gary Waltham via gwaltham@rcog.org.uk

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