

Joint Committee on Intercollegiate Examinations

24 December 2020

Dear Candidate

Intercollegiate Specialty Examinations - 2021

I sincerely apologise for having to write to you on Christmas Eve but on behalf of the JCIE and the four surgical Royal Colleges I do need to update you with respect to examination staging in the face of the threat posed by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and in particular the variant form(s) of the virus.

You will all be very aware of recent developments with respect to restrictions on travel and gatherings. Through the Chair of the Joint Surgical Colleges, the JCIE is receiving regular updates from all the UK Chief Medical Officers and there is increasing concern that even tighter restrictions will be required to try to control transmission and that enhanced restrictions are unlikely to be short-lived. At the same time, we are witnessing increasing pressure on our already over-stretched NHS and this is being exacerbated by high level of staff sickness absence. At the very least, January and February 2021 are going to be extremely difficult months for everyone and in all probability, there will be more emphasis on legally enforced travel restrictions.

Having engaged with all relevant stakeholders and in consultation with the four College Presidents, the JCIE has had to rapidly review its planned examination activity for the early part of 2021. I fully appreciate that what is outlined below will be a major disappointment to many of you but sadly the JCIE has no alternative. Believe me these decisions are not easy, but I would rather they were communicated now rather than have you spend many weeks in preparation only for you to experience an inevitable last-minute examination cancellation. The following is the agreed plan as of Thursday 24 December 2020.

Section 1 examinations: January and February 2021

- Computer based testing in Pearson VUE centres **will proceed** as planned. Appropriate social distancing and sanitisation arrangements are in place at all test centres and have been for some time. Many test centres will be closed for the delivery of tests for other organisations, but Pearson VUE is maintaining their service for JCIE candidates.
- For candidates scheduled to have a paper copy Section 1 examination, the JCIE still intends that these go ahead as planned. Paper copy examinations, however, do require JCIE staff to travel from Edinburgh to various locations around the country. Should such travel be barred by enforced travel restrictions the JCIE will have no alternative but to cancel the paper copy examinations and this could be at short notice.

Section 2 examinations: February 2021

- Unfortunately, the JCIE has no alternative but to **cancel** the Section 2 examinations in General Surgery and Trauma & Orthopaedic Surgery that were scheduled to take place 3/4/5 February and 7/8/9 February, respectively. Staging these two large examinations would involve somewhere between 450 and 500 people travelling to and gathering in Glasgow. This is not appropriate in the face of the current coronavirus threat and almost certainly will not be permitted.
- Candidates who are currently enrolled in these two examinations will automatically be transferred to the next diet – 25/26/27 April for Trauma & Orthopaedic Surgery and 26/27/28 May for General Surgery.
- Candidates who are currently on a waiting list for a Section 2 place in February 2021 will also be automatically carried forward to a revised waiting list for April and May.

- Contingency plans will be put in place to account for the cancellation of the February Section 2 examinations (see below).

Section 2 examinations: March 2021 onwards

- At the time of writing, the JCIE hopes to be able to run the Section 2 examinations that are planned to take place from 1 March 2021 onwards.
- This decision, is however, subject to review. There will be ongoing dialogue with the Governments of the devolved nations, the Chief Medical Officers, and the Departments of Health. An update will be provided 6 weeks prior to the examination date of each specialty. For example, for Plastic Surgery, the Section 2 examination is scheduled to commence on 1 March and for this specialty the JCIE will communicate the examination status by 18 January.
- If cancellation of any Section 2 examination planned for March 2021 onwards is required, the contingency plan will be the same as for the February examinations.

Contingency Planning

- The JCIE is actively working on a plan to mitigate against the impact of cancelled Section 2 examinations.
- For General Surgery and Trauma & Orthopaedic Surgery, there will be a replacement Section 2 diet arranged for each specialty. These will be to accommodate candidates who would normally be placed in the April (Trauma & Orthopaedics) and May (General Surgery) examinations. As previously mentioned, the April and May diets will now be allocated to candidates displaced from the February 2021 examinations. Further details will be communicated as soon as possible.
- Similarly, if other specialties suffer enforced Section 2 cancellations from March onwards, contingency plans will be put in place.

I am really sorry to be communicating this news, especially at this time of year, but for General Surgery and Trauma & Orthopaedic Surgery Section 2 candidates in particular, with the scheduled examination dates being only six weeks away, I would rather than you had notice now rather than have you devote precious time to preparation only for you to then experience a short notice cancellation. I really had hoped after getting through the November series of examinations in the face of an accelerating pandemic that we would be able to do the same again but sadly this is not to be. I genuinely feel for you all. However, I do not need to remind any of you of the precarious and unpredictable circumstances we are currently in.

Once again, I am extremely grateful for your understanding and patience. I am comforted by your appreciation that we are dealing with circumstances that are not under the JCIE's control. Rest assured, all of us at the JCIE will do our utmost to get things back to 'normal' as soon as we possibly can. My one plea to you is to refrain from calling the office or emailing the Secretariat for further information – there is none to give at this stage and in any case the office is now closed until 5 January 2021. We will provide further updates at the earliest opportunity.

I do hope you have as good a time as is possible in the current climate over the Christmas and New Year holiday period. Please stay safe and well.



JOHN R MCGREGOR

CHAIR – JOINT COMMITTEE ON INTERCOLLEGIATE EXAMINATIONS