

Our Reference: FOI/2016/04/168

**UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM**

Legal Services

Ms Sheppard  
What do they know

**Director  
Mrs C M E Pike LLB  
Solicitor**

18 May 2016

Dear Ms Sheppard

**Re: request for information under The Freedom of Information Act.**

Further to your request for information dated 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016, please find attached the University of Birmingham's response. If you have any queries with regard to this letter, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Please note our statement in respect of Copyright, which is also attached.

If you are unhappy with the manner in which your request has been dealt with, you may ask for an internal review. The University's Complaints and Appeals procedure is available at <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/university/governance/policies-regs/information/index.aspx>

Yours sincerely

Freedom of Information Team  
University of Birmingham

Encs

**Your request for information reads:**

*“I would like to know the following information in relation to medical undergraduates studying the 5 year medical course A100, MBChB:*

*Regarding the fourth year exams:*

*1. Has Birmingham Medical School compared the degree of difficulty of questions that it uses for the undergraduate fourth year theory exams with fourth year exams in other universities?*

*2. If so, please list the universities that it has used to compare against*

*3. Please attach reports that have been written in the last 8 years that analyse or review the degree of difficulty of Birmingham University fourth year medical theory exams against other medical schools in the UK. Please note the names of the Universities that Birmingham Medical School is being compared with.*

*4. Where there are no reports comparing Birmingham Medical School against other Medical Schools in the UK for the degree of difficulty of fourth year medical theory exams please state clearly how Birmingham ensures that it's standards are similar to other Medical Schools in the UK.*

*5. In comparing fourth year medical exam question examples that students can access there is an obvious difference in the way theory exam questions are expressed. The Birmingham questions are generally more ambiguous than most Medical School exam questions for fourth year students. Please produce minutes or reports from the last 8 years where Birmingham management staff have discussed this issue?”*

**The University of Birmingham responds:**

The University of Birmingham is required to respond to a request made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (“the Act”) if it holds the information being requested, unless it is appropriate to apply one of the limited exemptions set out in the Act.

The 4th year examination for the Clinical Core 3 module consists of two single best answer multiple choice question (MCQ) papers and an Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE). Theoretical knowledge and its application to clinical scenarios are tested in both the MCQ papers and the OSCE with Clinical Skills additionally being tested in the OSCE. There is not a specific theory examination in the 4th year at Birmingham Medical School.

In answer to your previous FOI requests we have answered on the assumption that where you asked about “*practical assessment*” you meant the OSCE and when you asked about the “*theory assessment*” you meant the MCQ and we have answered accordingly. However, as explained above it is, in reality more complex than that.

**1. Has Birmingham Medical School compared the degree of difficulty of questions that it uses for the undergraduate fourth year theory exams with fourth year exams in other universities?**

The University does not compare the "difficulty" of specific questions against those used in the 4th year in other universities as each university has a different curriculum structure and uses differing methods of examination which means that students at different universities may not be directly comparable at the end of the 4th year. Indeed, some universities have 'finals' exams at the end of Y4, that is, they are expecting students to be at the level of a Day 1 Foundation Programme Year 1 (FY1) doctor. We do not expect this until the end of Year 5.

The MCQs are drawn from both a local bank of questions and from the national Medical Schools Council Assessment Alliance question bank (questions contributed by all UK Medical Schools and used across the UK; <http://www.medschools.ac.uk/MSCAA/Pages/default.aspx>) and the weighting of individual questions is determined by a panel of clinicians involved in the teaching and examination of 4th year medical students, using the Angoff Standard Setting method.

In common with all other universities we are compliant with the processes which involve External Examiners (those from other medical schools who are familiar with students at the same stage of the programme at their home institution and others where they have performed External Examiners' duties). Our external examiners review the MCQ exams with knowledge of our curriculum and the standard setting we use and have not expressed any concern that they are inappropriate for Birmingham students at this stage of our course.

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/external-examiner-system.pdf>

**2. If so, please list the universities that it has used to compare against**

Not applicable (see answer to 1).

**3. Please attach reports that have been written in the last 8 years that analyse or review the degree of difficulty of Birmingham University fourth year medical theory exams against other medical schools in the UK. Please note the names of the Universities that Birmingham Medical School is being compared with.**

Not applicable (see answer to 1).

**4. Where there are no reports comparing Birmingham Medical School against other Medical Schools in the UK for the degree of difficulty of fourth year medical theory exams, please state clearly how Birmingham ensures that its standards are similar to other Medical Schools in the UK.**

Not applicable (see answer to 1).

5. ***In comparing fourth year medical exam question examples that students can access, there is an obvious difference in the way theory exam questions are expressed. The Birmingham questions are generally more ambiguous than most Medical School exam questions for fourth year students. Please produce minutes or reports from the last 8 years where Birmingham management staff have discussed this issue?***

This is a matter of opinion. We do not consider our questions to be “more ambiguous” (see comments above about the use of the national question bank, which indicates that not all the questions we use are written by University of Birmingham Medical School staff). In 2015-16 we have made example OSCEs available to students to demonstrate to them the process and the standard. At present we do not make MCQs available to students - although this is our aim. MCQs available on our VLE are there as learning tools not example exam questions.

## **The University of Birmingham**

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