



## HERE TO HELP

# HIGHER SPECIALIST DIPLOMAS PT.2

The second of two articles in which **Chris Ward**, IBMS Head of Examinations, outlines the latest developments around Higher Specialist Diplomas.

In last month's article I provided a background to the work of the Higher Specialist Diploma (HSD) review group and explained the aims, learning outcomes, eligibility criteria and portfolio requirements of the qualification. This month I will be explaining the structure of the exams, how they are marked and how candidates undertaking the HSD will be supported.

## Exam Structure

Once a candidate has passed the portfolio stage of the HSD, they proceed to the exams, which take place each September. The HSD examiners reviewed the current nature of the four papers. It was recognised that the short answer question paper (Paper 1) is proving particularly problematic. The examiners also discussed the importance of ensuring that the exams are appropriate for an M-level qualification. As a result of this work, from 2020 the exams will be structured as follows:

- **Discipline-Specific Short Answer Questions** - 60 Minutes - Questions that focus on problem-solving / operational scenarios / analysis of results or quality control issues. Candidates will be

expected to answer four questions in an hour. This replaces the current short answer question paper.

- **Generic Essay Questions** - 120 Minutes - This is the paper which is common to all HSD candidates, no matter their discipline. It will continue to cover laboratory management, quality and training issues that prospective Band 7 individuals should be aware of. Candidates will have one pre-released mandatory question and will also be expected to answer two further questions from a choice of four.
- **Discipline-Specific Essay Questions** - 120 Minutes - Candidates will be expected to answer two from five questions (rather than the current three from six). This will allow candidates to go in to greater detail.
- **Discipline-Specific Case Studies** - 120 Minutes - Candidates will be expected to answer three mandatory case studies, one pre-seen and two unseen.

## Exam Marking and Banking of Results

Each response will be marked by two examiners, with a third examiner being involved if there is a significant discrepancy in the

marks that are awarded. All four papers will continue to be equally weighted with the overall pass mark remaining at 50% across the four papers with no paper scoring below 40%. This means that candidates can pass with papers that score between 40% and 50%, provided they meet the required overall 50% average.

Up until now, candidates who were unsuccessful at their first attempt had, if they wished to re-sit the exam, to redo all four papers. As part of the review process it was agreed to change this requirement and, therefore, from the 2019 exam series candidates who fail to reach the overall pass mark on their first attempt will automatically "bank" the papers in which they scored >50%. They will only have to re-sit any papers where they score <50%. For the re-sit, the marks that the candidate achieves on each of their re-sit papers will be the ones that counts towards the overall qualification mark. This change does not dispute the fact that 40-49% is a pass mark for the paper but rather it is stating that a mark in that range is not acceptable for banking.

It is expected that this change will reduce the pressure on candidates for any re-sit. It will also reduce the costs as candidates will, for their re-sit, pay a fee

per paper that they have to re-sit.

The portfolio will remain valid for two attempts at the exam, so banked marks will only be available for one re-sit. If the 50% overall mark is not achieved at this point (i.e. after two





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attempts at the exam) the candidate will have to submit a new portfolio and re-sit the entire examination.


### Support to Candidates


The IBMS recognises that for some the HSD will be the first qualification an individual has undertaken for some time

and this can present some challenges. Even for those who have completed a qualification more recently because of its self-taught nature the HSD is a very different qualification to what many candidates will be used to.

The IBMS will be working with the HSD examiners to provide, in addition to the candidate preparation days, more support and guidance for those undertaking the qualification. This will include greater clarity in the syllabus for the generic section and each discipline so that candidates will have a better understanding of the topics that will come

up in the exam. There will be more guidance on writing at this level; exemplar materials and work will also be undertaken to look at how the IBMS discussion forums can be better used as a means of support.

Past papers for the generic essays, discipline-specific essays and case studies will remain available on the IBMS website. Examples of the types of questions that will be asked in the new version of the short answer question paper will also be made available. 

 If you have any questions please contact [examinations@ibms.org](mailto:examinations@ibms.org)

IMAGES: ISTOCK



**HEALTH SERVICES  
LABORATORIES**

## THE DOORS ARE OPEN VISIT THE HALO BUILDING

After showcasing our world-class headquarters at the 2019 IBMS Congress, Health Services Laboratories are now inviting Biomedical Scientists to visit our facilities this November.

The Halo Building is a multi-discipline site, featuring Europe's largest automated Blood Sciences and Infection Sciences laboratories. Tours will also include visits to some of the specialist services HSL provides including Haemoncology, Parasitology, Mycology and our multidisciplinary Genetics & Molecular Pathology department. The Halo also serves as a hub laboratory for 46 other sites across the UK including multiple laboratories in London and South East England - in total over 80,000 samples come through our doors each and every day.

Tours of the Halo Building are available to anyone who is HCPC registered. There will also be several short talks about the training and education opportunities within the organisation. Heads of department will also be on hand to answer any of your questions.

The Halo Building open day will be held on the **21st November 2019**, with two sessions at 2:30pm and 6:30pm. Simply email us to reserve your place or to ask any questions about the open days.

Register your interest by emailing:  
**[openday@hslpathology.com](mailto:openday@hslpathology.com)**

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