

# **National Clinical Coding Qualification (UK)**

## **June 2021 – Frequently Asked Questions**

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## Introduction

Following the announcement that the June 2021 National Clinical Coding Qualification (NCCQ) examinations were to go ahead as an electronic exam, IHRIM has received a number of questions from the clinical coding service regarding various aspects of the design and delivery of the qualification in this new format. As many of these questions have touched upon the same, or similar themes – indeed with many being almost identically worded – the decision was taken to publish our responses in the form of this FAQ document, thereby making this information available to all members of the clinical coding community with an interest in the qualification.

Throughout this document you will encounter the acronym LMS, this stands for Learning Management System, and is the term used to describe the platform which IHRIM has acquired for delivering our electronic exams. The LMS provider which IHRIM has chosen is Synap, an award-winning LMS provider based in Leeds. Synap was founded by medical students, initially as a way of helping students prepare for their medical training exams. Their online study and exam platform has grown over the years and now provides services to customers across a [variety of sectors globally](#). IHRIM is very proud to be able to partner with Synap and offer this exciting solution to the clinical coding profession in the UK.

## Background

The decision to move the NCCQ to an electronic format is not one which has been taken lightly. Following the postponement of the exams in March 2020, due to the national lockdown measures enforced by the UK government, there was strong feedback from the coding profession that exam delivery needed to become more agile. Based on this feedback, and the recognition that there was no certainty as to when normal arrangements would resume, IHRIM felt it had a clear and firm mandate to seek out an alternative. Although we had hoped to run exams in late 2020 this was also not possible due to the on-going coronavirus pandemic. This is very regrettable, and IHRIM is sorry for the inconvenience and distress this may have caused candidates. However, we hope that the coding community understands that these decisions have been made with everyone's safety as the utmost priority. As such, the need for a way of conducting the exam in a more distributed fashion – rather than relying on regional exam venues – was self-evident. There have been months of discussions and we have engaged with the NHS Digital Terminology and Classifications Delivery Service, who are responsible for the qualification in partnership IHRIM, and the rest of the Examination Quality Assurance Board, including members from Digital Health and Care Wales, and the office for Health and

Social Care Northern Ireland (HSCNI). This board consists of clinical coding managers, auditors, and trainers, who all bring years of experience in the coding profession. During the past year we have trialled several different solutions and have also worked closely with the eAssessment Association, whose expertise in this area has been invaluable to us in finding our way forward. We are very grateful for all their help and support.

The past year has been challenging for us all, the IHRIM board has been working very hard to develop the electronic exam over the past several months, and we have been well-supported by Synap in configuring our learning portal. The IHRIM board is made up entirely of volunteers, all of whom have full-time jobs working in the NHS, and so it is thanks to their on-going commitment to the profession and determination to see our exams continue to be delivered in a safe environment, that this work has been completed. We recognise that this transformation has come perhaps sooner than expected for some, but we hope that our colleagues across the coding profession will acknowledge that this is the proper way forward. Of course, there is always some element of risk associated with these types of undertaking, and no endeavour can totally avoid risk. However, on balance we believe that the electronic format is the best way of delivering the exams as paper alternatives are too open to breach of confidentiality, tampering, and loss. By using an online portal we can ensure that the exam is available at the time it is needed and that there will be no breach of confidentiality, also once a candidate has submitted their responses these are stored safely and cannot be tampered with or become lost or damaged in transit. These are all important considerations when assuring the integrity of our examinations.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Will candidates be eligible for extra time to allow for slower typing speeds and those who can write quicker than they type?**

The issue of fairness in an exam is complex. The Equality Act 2010 requires an Awarding Body to make reasonable adjustments where a disabled person would be at a substantial disadvantage in undertaking an assessment. Exam Access Arrangements (EAAs) are the reasonable adjustments that can be made for an exam candidate and might include things like extra time to complete an exam paper, permission to use assistive technology, or provision of rest breaks. Exam arrangements can only be granted if they are a candidate's 'normal way of working' and the candidate has a history of need which is supported by evidence. For example, a candidate who is eligible for extra time would need to demonstrate they work much more slowly than others and this would be supported by a report from an Educational Psychologist or other qualified health professional.

Clinical coders will be familiar with using computerised systems and performing data entry tasks, i.e. inputting codes, using either a specialised software encoder, or another form of interface. What IHRIM has put in place for the June 2021 NCCQ is now much closer to the reality of clinical coders role, when compared to the handwritten examination. Therefore, we do not believe that candidates are being unfairly disadvantaged as this is very similar to their normal way of working. For Paper 2 (theory), marks are awarded on the basis of domain knowledge. Candidates are encouraged to write concisely and answer questions clearly. No marks are awarded or deducted based on style, grammar, or composition. Candidate performance in past examinations strongly suggests that successful candidates take, on average, two hours to finish Paper 2. Therefore, as the duration of the exam is already set at three hours, we believe there will be ample time to complete.

Further information on the [process for handling requests for adjustments to examination procedure](#) can be found on our website.

## **When will candidates be able to access the learning management system (LMS) and begin to practice, and will this be made available to their managers and trainers?**

Access is being set up now and we expect candidates will be able to access the LMS very soon. Unfortunately, we are only able to offer access to candidates that are registered to take the June 2021 exam. There are licensing restrictions that limit the number of users that we can have set up on the platform at any time, procuring extra licenses would incur additional costs. As such priority must be given to candidates and our system administrators.

Please note that the main purpose of accessing the LMS now is to allow candidates to familiarise themselves with the screen layout and controls. Although we have prepared a practice exam, it is not expected that candidates will need to take the entire exam from start to finish. We ask that candidates attempt a few of the questions and submit their answers, to ensure they understand the processes involved. Currently we are unable to provide marks or feedback for any candidates who undertake the practice paper, as the marking of answers is all still done manually. Candidates wishing to sit a practice exam where they can mark their own answers will need to do this off-platform, using the papers available on the IHRIM website or Delen.

## **What happens if there are issues arise with our network connection during the timed exam?**

A stable internet connection will help the exam to run smoothly. However, the Synap LMS is very lightweight as the web page is pre-generated with the content being updated dynamically, this reduces the data being transferred to and from the server and ensures that the page updates quickly and responsively, so a strong connection is not required. In addition, candidate progress will be saved continuously throughout, and this also helps to keep the payload light.

In the event of a catastrophic network failure, candidates will be offered a resit. Regrettably, such circumstances are beyond IHRIM's control. However, IHRIM will liaise directly with any candidates affected in these circumstances. Therefore, we strongly encourage you to contact your IT or Digital support team to ensure that there is no planned downtime scheduled to coincide with the examination period and to minimise potential disruption so as to help avoid this outcome.

## **Will the learning management system (LMS) enforce that candidates strictly answer questions in order, or will there be the option to answer questions in any order?**

Candidates are free to approach the questions in any order they desire. Although the exam is presented in a linear fashion, as it would be in the paper format, there are navigation tools which will allow for candidates to quickly move back and forth through the different sections. These tools also provide visual cues to help candidates quickly identify which questions they haven't answered and if there are questions which have been skipped. Please refer to the [user guide](#) for more information.

## **How will candidates be monitored during the exam and what does the invigilator's role involve, is there a job description for this, and how will IHRIM prepare invigilators?**

IHRIM have asked that candidates arrange for independent invigilators to be nominated and appointed by their hosting trust/site. We appreciate that this has not been a simple task for some, and we are extremely grateful to those coding managers who have made tremendous efforts to support their staff in being able to take their qualification following what has been a challenging year for us all. Invigilators will be responsible for monitoring candidates during the exam and to ensure that exam conditions are maintained, and we will issue advice on how to monitor inappropriate usage. A full invigilator job description is available on the IHRIM website. We will host pre-exam invigilator calls, as we have always done, to go through the specifics and allow for in the weeks running up to the exam date.

Remote proctoring was also considered but this was ruled out early on due to a number of perceived difficulties, including: installation of the proprietary software needed on to NHS hardware, availability of web cameras and microphones, and the governance implications of remote monitoring and recording. There is also a significant cost implication associated with this option. Therefore, we elected to go with on-site invigilators. IHRIM will investigate how we can better address this for future sittings of the NCCQ.

## **Does the LMS allow candidates to highlight on-screen text?**

Unfortunately, this is not a function that is currently supported. IHRIM is committed to working with Synap to continuously improve the functionality and usability of the LMS over-time. Candidates will be allowed to make notes on paper, or they can make notes directly in the text box used for answering questions, refer to the [user guide](#) for further information.

## **When can candidates expect to receive their results by, and will the marking scheme used to be the same as before?**

We currently expect that results will be ready by early September. While the exam is moving to an electronic format, due to the type of exam questions and the complex nature of the subject matter it is not possible to automate the marking currently. Therefore, the marking will still need to be done manually. IHRIM uses experienced clinical coding professionals to mark our exams to ensure that this is of high quality. Furthermore, IHRIM uses a method known as double-blind marking, this means that each script is marked by two independent markers. We then compare the marks awarded by each marker and convene a Competency Panel, to moderate and resolve any discrepancies. Following the moderation, the whole process is reviewed by our External Examiner, who is a senior academic lecturer in Health Informatics. Following their approval that the process has met the appropriate rigour, the exam board meet to ratify the results before their publication. This is a thorough and detailed process which takes time; however, it is time well spent to ensure that the marks are accurate. IHRIM will endeavour to get results to candidates sooner if possible.

The marking used for the NCCQ can be applied in the exact same way regardless of the exam format, as such, there will be no difference in the way marks are applied for candidates sitting the exam in June 2021 compared to those that have sat in previous years.

## **We have been told a user guide for the LMS will be made available, when will this be?**

We aim to make this available at the same time as publishing this FAQ, the document will be available on the IHRIM website, but will also be available on the LMS. We plan to add to the user guide over time to ensure it remains current and useful, and welcome constructive feedback.

### **How will disruptions that occur on the day, for example noise, be dealt with, and what considerations will IHRIM afford candidates who suffer severe disruption?**

This will be handled in the same manner as with prior examinations. Invigilators will record in the invigilator's log the time, duration and severity of any disruption that occurs during the period of the exam. These will then be considered by the examination board. Unfortunately, an e-mail from a manager alone will not suffice in these circumstances as evidence as the board are reliant on the information provided by invigilators to ascertain the conditions. If a candidate feels that they may be unfairly disadvantaged by circumstances arising on the day, then they (not their manager) must write to IHRIM as soon as possible after the exam to explain the circumstances. Candidates should refer to the Complaints and Appeals procedures.

### **Will use of the Classifications eVersions be supported for this exam?**

Although the NCCQ exam is moving to a digital format, at the current time IHRIM requests that candidates continue to use their hardcopy print versions of the ICD-10 and OPCS-4.9 classification books. This is to ensure fair and equitable examination conditions for all, as installation of the e-viewer is not always possible depending on the IT permissions at certain trusts, also candidates may not be using their usual PC or workstation, as such, this avoids any technical issues which may arise from having to install the e-viewer on another machine. There are also reported compatibility issues with the e-viewer and modern versions of Windows. The use of hard copies is not any different to how most clinical coders operate in their day jobs and is what would have been the case with a traditional paper-based exam. IHRIM is committed to working with its partners to enable the use of more digital solutions in the future. We thank you for your understanding and cooperation.



## **The examination fees are the same for June 2021 has they have been in the past, given the changes to arrangements can organisations expect these to be reduced?**

IHRIM is a non-profit organisation. Any income over expenditure is re-invested into supporting the membership. As the Institute has not been able to provide any examinations for over a year, we have not had any income from exams to support the administrative function. The decision was made to keep the Office open to provide the membership with a point of contact meaning that none of our staff were furloughed and have been paid throughout the pandemic. Through close management of the finances the Institute is still viable.

The payments to invigilators and the cost of venues is a small part of the overall costs of supplying the examination. The largest proportion of the costs is for the marking of the papers and the provision of the questions. Both functions have not changed and will still be paid for as before. The Institute have also had to purchase access to the new platform and buy the additional support and training needed both of which are new supplementary expenditures. Therefore, there will not be any reduction in the cost of the examination. However, trusts will save on travel and overnight stay costs for their candidates, while the candidates themselves will benefit from not having to travel to take the examination, which has always been a source of complaint as it is considered to add to the stress on examination day.

## **Will candidates be allowed access to a pen and paper for making notes?**

Absolutely. Candidates will be allowed to use pen and paper for taking notes in the same way that they would in a traditional exam setting. The paper must not be a pad but plain, unbound sheets of paper. All paper must be left behind at the end of the exam for destruction by the invigilator.

## **What are the system requirements for running the LMS?**

There are no specific system requirements beyond having access to a laptop or PC, with a modern internet browser installed (we recommend Google Chrome for the best experience, Internet Explorer is **not** supported), and a stable internet connection. Further information can be found on the Synap help pages by following the link [here](#).

## When is the next NCCQ examination scheduled to take place?

IHRIM does not currently have plans to hold a second sitting of the NCCQ in 2021; there has been exceptional interest in the June exam with high numbers of candidates registered. Therefore, IHRIM's current focus is on delivery of this examination. We fully expect to be able to return to our usual NCCQ exam schedule – offering sittings in March and September – from next year (2022). Dates will be publicised through the usual routes in due course. The entire production process for a single sitting of the NCCQ is a lengthy process that usually takes nine months to complete. This includes the initial authoring of the examination questions, testing and quality assurance, registration & other administrative tasks, marking, moderation (including external quality assurance), dealing with complaints, publication of results, hearing of appeals, and the final publication of the examination papers. Therefore, provision of an additional sitting in 2021 will be extremely challenging.

## Will candidates still have access to Coding Clinic Ref 88, COPD coding table, pain relief procedures, and the National Tariff Chemotherapy Regimens list as was the case in prior examinations?

*Coding Clinic* Ref 88, **DCS.X.5: COAD/COPD, chest infection and asthma with associated conditions**, and **PCSA2: Pain relief procedures** are all reproduced within the LMS and candidates sitting Paper 1 (practical) will be able to access these additional resources by clicking the relevant on-screen link. These are the only additional resources that can be accessed during the exam. An excerpt from The National Tariff Chemotherapy Regimens list is also provided as required, i.e. if there is a specific question(s) requiring its use. Candidates will not need to bring their own copies.

## How will spelling mistakes and typewriting mistakes (typos) be handled?

Spelling is only considered in the marking for Paper 2 (theory) Section E Anatomy & Physiology (including Medical Terminology) and remains a requirement for this section of the exam only. Transposition of numbers and other input errors will be considered errors and marked accordingly, this is consistent with the clinical coding audit methodology and the normal ways of working. Candidates are responsible for the answers they submit and are encouraged to check their work before final submission.

## **What are the rules regarding marginalia and other annotations in candidates' classification books?**

There are no changes regarding marginalia as compared to previous exams. Candidates should refer to the 'Instructions to Candidates' which they will receive a copy of. In summary, marginalia are allowed and IHRIM does not set prescriptive guidance on marginalia, however, we recommend that they are kept brief. The purpose of marginalia is to enhance the existing text; overcrowded pages can become more difficult to interpret particularly in exam scenarios. Candidates should condense the essence of the standard into a format which best aids them without needing to re-write the entire text into their book. Furthermore, we recommend that annotations are made in pencil since standards may change from one year to the next and so a requirement to erase or alter an annotation may arise.

There are clear rules against the insertion of additional pages, whether these be stuck down or not, into either the ICD-10 or OPCS-4 classification books. Invigilators will remove any additional sheets, regardless of what is on them, from books.

## **Will a paper version be offered?**

IHRIM has no plans to offer a paper alternative for the June 2021 NCCQ examinations as our resources are focussed on the delivery of the electronic exam. In October 2020, we wrote to all NCCQ candidates about our plans to move ahead with an electronic assessment format, pending a suitable solution being agreed upon. In this letter we also clearly informed candidates that the format of the exam would not be subject to individual preference. Therefore, all candidates registered to take the June 2021 NCCQ were aware of these terms when they made the decision to register. IHRIM will investigate the possibility of offering the option of a traditional paper-based exam in the future.

## **Will the exam cover the COVID-19 National Clinical Coding Standards and new *Coding Clinic Ref 121: Procedures performed for female pelvic organ prolapse and stress urinary incontinence?***

We can confirm that coding standard **DCS.XXII.5 COVID-19 (U071-U07.7)** and the associated [COVID-19 National Clinical Coding Standards](#) published on Delen, will not form the basis of any questions featured in the NCCQ examinations (practical or theory) scheduled to take place on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2021.

The COVID-19 National Clinical Coding Standards have already been through several iterations during the past year. Therefore, acknowledging the potential for further updates, the NCCQ Examination Quality Assurance (QA) Board has collectively agreed to exclude this specific topic from our exams for the time being. We will review this decision prior to future sittings of the NCCQ and notify prospective candidates of any changes.

In addition, *Coding Clinic Ref 121 Procedures performed for female pelvic organ prolapse and stress urinary incontinence* has also been discussed by the QA board, and it has similarly been agreed, owing to the short time between publication of the *Coding Clinic* in April and the exam day in June, that this would also be excluded from the current exam. This will be reviewed before the next sitting.

The NCCQ Examination QA Board is composed of representatives from NHS Digital Terminology and Classification Delivery Service, Iechyd a Gofal Digidol Cymru (Digital Health and Care Wales), Health and Social Care Northern Ireland (HSCNI), and IHRIM.

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