Examination Program Guide
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Overview and Regulations for Use of IFOM Exams

This guide provides general information about the International Foundations of Medicine® (IFOM)® Examination Program offered by the National Board of Medical Examiners® (NBME®).

MISSION

The primary mission of the IFOM Examination Program is to serve the international medical education community by providing high-quality assessment tools as well as information and assistance to medical educators. IFOM exams are achievement tests in a broad sense, requiring medical students to solve scientific and clinical problems. Although students’ performance on the exams will reflect the learning specific to their course experiences, their test scores will also reflect educational development resulting from their overall medical school experiences. These exams are constructed to be appropriate for a broad range of curricular approaches.

BACKGROUND

The NBME offers standardized, objective exams that measure the core knowledge internationally expected of students at critical points in undergraduate medical education. The exams are designed to provide institutions with effective evaluation tools and useful examinee performance data that can be compared with a large representative group of international examinees at the same stage of training. IFOM exams are available globally and provide faculty with valuable feedback on the performance of their students.

IFOM exams are developed and reviewed by committees of international content experts following the same rigorous protocol used to build Step 1 and Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK) of the United States Medical Licensing Examination® (USMLE®). IFOM exams have distinct advantages over locally constructed exams in the assessment of student achievement:

- Item formats are similar to those used on Step 1 and Step 2 CK.
- The exams concentrate heavily on application and integration of knowledge rather than on recall of isolated facts. Many items are framed in the context of clinical vignettes.
- Multiple forms of each exam are available for use.

IFOM exams are intended to complement other sources of information about the educational progress of medical students and others who take these exams. The results of IFOM exams should not be viewed as the beginning and end of evaluation. They should be interpreted in light of other available information, just as curriculum evaluation cannot be based on exam results alone. The quality of teaching can and should be evaluated by frequent peer observation and personal feedback, not inferred solely from the level of test scores.
DESCRIPTION OF IFOM EXAMINATIONS

The IFOM Basic Science Examination (BSE) is designed to assess the common international core of knowledge expected of students who have completed the preclinical curriculum and are about to begin study of clinical medicine.

The IFOM Clinical Science Examination (CSE) is designed to assess the international core of clinical knowledge in medicine, surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and psychiatry expected of students in the final year of undergraduate medical education.

Paper IFOM exams contain 160 single-best-answer multiple-choice questions and are administered in one four-hour session. Examinees can take a break if escorted by a proctor. Web-based IFOM exams contain 160 single-best-answer multiple-choice questions and are administered in two two-hour sessions with an optional 15-minute break in between. Examinees can take additional breaks if escorted by a proctor.

The IFOM Clinical Science Exam Self-Assessment is also available for examinees who would like to prepare for the IFOM CSE or for other benchmarking purposes. This is an 80-item self-administered exam; read more at http://www.nbme.org/Students/sas/ifom.html

EXAM LANGUAGES

The IFOM BSE is available in International English. The CSE is available in International English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian.

IFOM EXAMINATION PROGRAM GOALS

Our multifaceted program goals are to provide:

- high-quality assessments that are efficient and cost effective;
- new forms of assessment that promote improvements in learning and instruction;
- opportunities to conduct and disseminate research that informs faculty and policy makers and promotes their understanding of assessment;
- information on student areas of strength and weakness to help advance educational improvement and equity; and
- support services for a range of assessment and educational programs.

POLICY ON USE OF IFOM EXAMINATIONS

The NBME provides IFOM Basic and Clinical Science exams for the purpose of assessing the educational achievement of individuals in specific content areas. These exams may be provided to medical schools and institutions listed in the Foundation for the Advancement of International Medical Education and Research’s (FAIMER®) International Medical Education Directory (IMED; https://imed.faimer.org/). All institutions using these exams must comply with test administration standards, including security protocols.

In addition, any current medical student or graduate is eligible to take IFOM independent of their university or institution.

THE EXECUTIVE CHIEF PROCTOR (ECP)

The NBME requires that a single individual be designated to oversee all NBME examination services used by an institution.

At medical schools, the ECP is nominated by the dean and approved by the NBME. The ECP role is usually filled by someone in the dean’s office (e.g., an associate dean) who has a commensurate level of authority. At residency programs or other organizations, these responsibilities may be carried out by a designated individual approved by the NBME.
PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE ECP

ECP responsibilities will vary according to the exam service provided.

The following list outlines the primary duties of the position:

- Ensure that the security of all (paper, web-based, and customized assessment) examination content is maintained at all times.

- Oversee administrative tasks for the local provision of services, particularly online ordering of subject and web-based examinations.

- Ensure that all staff responsible for administering examinations (i.e., Chief Proctors) prepare for and conduct the test sessions in strict compliance with the procedures and regulations outlined in the Chief Proctor’s Manual for Basic/Clinical Science Examinations (paper) or Web-based Examinations Chief Proctor’s Manual.

- Ensure that all NBME examinations are administered in a secure, proctored setting.

- Ensure that examinees follow test day rules and procedures.

- Report any suspicious activities observed during an administration to the NBME immediately.

- Conduct investigations regarding irregular behavior, if necessary, and promptly provide the NBME with the outcome of any such investigation.

- Cooperate with the NBME in any investigation of a possible security breach.

- Order examination reviews for faculty through the NBME Exam Review Service (NERS) and proctor the examination reviews.

- Establish and monitor local financial accounts for services.

SECURITY OF EXAMINATIONS

To ensure the integrity of the IFOM Examination Program and the validity of the scores reported, it is essential to maintain the security and confidentiality of test materials at all times. All items used in IFOM exams are owned and copyrighted by the NBME. Any unauthorized reproduction or dissemination of test materials or any part of them through any means, including but not limited to copying, printing, photographing or downloading of electronic files, or reconstruction through memorization and/or dictation, is strictly prohibited. Appropriate action, which may include legal proceedings, will be taken to enforce copyright. The NBME retains the right to discontinue IFOM examination services in the event of a breach or suspected breach in the security of test materials.
Test Delivery Options

PAPER AND PENCIL EXAMINATIONS

To maintain the security of the test materials, specific procedures for administration of paper IFOM exams have been established by the NBME. Individuals authorized to have custody of paper IFOM exams (the ECP, AECP, or department staff authorized to administer the tests) are required to be familiar with NBME regulations governing use of this material and to abide by and enforce the regulations as outlined in the IFOM Chief Proctor’s Manual. The Chief Proctor’s Manual is also included with each shipment of test materials.

For security reasons, IFOM exam administrations should take place on the date originally requested and acknowledged by the NBME. Test books should not be held for delayed administration to students who could not be tested on the scheduled date. This practice increases the risk of a breach in the security of the test materials and could compromise the validity of scores reported for the delayed administration.

While your institution may allow students to retain test materials from faculty-developed exams, this is not the case with IFOM exams materials. Test books must be collected from every examinee at the conclusion of each test administration and returned to the NBME.

WEB-BASED EXAMINATIONS

Web-based exams must be administered in a secure, proctored setting. All Chief Proctors (CP), including the ECP and the AECP, will have access to a centralized Chief Proctor Resource Site, which houses all the system applications in support of test administration. The CP must conduct the exam in strict compliance with the procedures outlined in the Chief Proctor’s Manual.

The NBME provides a web-based utility that checks both hardware and software configurations and downloads a plug-in that “secures” the browser. The computer is “locked down,” preventing the examinee from accessing applications such as e-mail or notepad.
Examination Content

CONTENT OUTLINES AND SAMPLE ITEMS

Content outlines developed by committees of international content experts are used to construct each test. Items are selected based on content and performance statistics. Test materials for the examinations have been derived from secure NBME item banks and from international test material development workshops. Test design committees have minimized the use of locally specific test questions, converted laboratory results to international measurement units, and minimized idiomatic use of language.

The final form of each exam is reviewed and approved by an internationally representative examination oversight committee prior to release.

PRACTICE EXAMS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

IFOM Basic Science
http://ifombasic.startpractice.com

IFOM Clinical Science
http://ifomclinical.startpractice.com

Use of sample materials is intended for exam preparation or practice by individuals who are scheduled to take the exams.

ITEM FORMAT

In keeping with USMLE trends, test designers have increased emphasis on application of knowledge rather than recall of isolated facts for all IFOM exams. Clinical science items are framed in the context of clinical vignettes.

One-best-answer (A-type) items, used in all IFOM exams, make explicit the number of options to be selected and are the most widely used multiple-choice item format. Each item consists of a focused item stem (e.g., a clinical vignette) and a lead-in question, followed by a series of options with one correct answer for each item.

### IFOM CONTENT OUTLINES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IFOM Basic Science Exam</th>
<th>System</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General Principles</td>
<td>30% - 35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organ Systems</td>
<td>65% - 70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hematopoietic and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lymphoreticular System</td>
<td>2% - 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central and Peripheral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nervous System</td>
<td>10% - 15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skin &amp; Related Connective Tissue</td>
<td>1% - 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Musculoskeletal System</td>
<td>4% - 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respiratory System</td>
<td>6% - 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cardiovascular System</td>
<td>6% - 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gastrointestinal System</td>
<td>6% - 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Renal/Urinary System</td>
<td>6% - 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reproductive System</td>
<td>4% - 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Endocrine System</td>
<td>4% - 7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IFOM Clinical Science Exam</th>
<th>System</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General Principles</td>
<td>2% - 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organ Systems</td>
<td>95% - 98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immunologic Disorders</td>
<td>4% - 7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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NBME Services Portal and Ordering Exams

**NBME SERVICES PORTAL (NSP)**

Services and reports related to IFOM exams are available through the **NBME Services Portal (NSP)**.

This is a secure website and a primary source for authorized users to obtain information about their students for a variety of activities related to IFOM exams, USMLE, NBME subject exams, and other services. It provides access to the Online Ordering System, Customized Assessment Services, and IFOM exam score reports.

A major feature of the NSP is the capability for an institution to create and manage its own users and to assign privileges to access specific areas of the portal. Each institution has at least one User Account Manager who is accountable for assigning users the privileges they need to access areas of the portal appropriate for their responsibilities.

**ONLINE ORDERING SYSTEM**

All IFOM exams are requested through the online ordering system. The online ordering system allows the user to enter order information, review the status of orders, and receive e-mail notifications at specific points during the ordering cycle.

**Web-based exams must be ordered in a time frame that allows the NBME to schedule administrative and technical support for the test date.**

- Orders can be placed up to 2 **calendar days** before the test date.
- Orders lock 5 calendar days before the test date.

**Revising and Cancelling Orders**

- All web-based examination orders can be revised or cancelled any time prior to the lock date.
- After the lock date, the NBME must be contacted to make order changes.

**ORDERING PAPER AND PENCIL EXAMS**

IFOM paper and pencil exams can be ordered through the online ordering system using your NSP account. If you have any questions about ordering a paper and pencil exam, please e-mail support@nbme.org for more information.

**Plan ahead!** Examinee rosters for paper and pencil exams must be received no later than 4 **weeks prior** to the administration date in the format specified below in order to allow sufficient time for processing and shipment of test material.


**ORDERING EXAMS AT PROMETRIC TEST CENTERS**

The International English language forms of the IFOM CSE and IFOM BSE are available at approved Prometric testing centers to examinees not affiliated with a participating medical school.

All applicants must undergo eligibility verification by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG®) to certify that they are a current medical student or graduate. **Individual applicants will not be able to test if they are not verified by the ECFMG.**

For more information, see the candidate brochure at: [www.nbme.org/PDF/IFOM/Candidate-Brochure.pdf](http://www.nbme.org/PDF/IFOM/Candidate-Brochure.pdf).
Payment Policy and Procedures

BILLING ACCOUNTS

The NBME requires that accounts be set up for the purpose of applying fees received and for computing any credit or payment due after scores have been reported.

There are two types of accounts: an institutional or ECP account, which is required, and department accounts, which are optional. Typically, these accounts reflect funding sources at an institution. Accounts carry credits only – no refunds are provided.

The NSP features a “My Billing Accounts” portal through which those who order or arrange for payment of exam services can view up-to-date information about the status of invoices, access monthly summaries, and pay for services directly.

PAYMENT TERMS

NBME policies for payment are as follows:

- Prepayment of invoices generated for exam services is due upon receipt.
- Payment must be in US currency only, unless otherwise specified.
- Score reports will not be released unless payment has been received.
- If an account accrues more than $1,000 in invoices that remain unpaid for 91 days following the test date, all score reports associated with that account will be held until the account is brought current. This applies even if other orders for that account were prepaid.

PAYMENT OPTIONS

Payment for exam services may be made by:

- Credit card (Visa or MasterCard only)
- Check or money order
- Wire transfer
- Institution account with a credit balance
Administering IFOM Examinations

The ECP has overall responsibility for management and planning of the test administration events for both paper and web-based exams. The ECP is also required to recruit chief proctors and other support staff as required to perform the tasks necessary to ensure a successful and secure test administration.

PAPER AND PENCIL ADMINISTRATIONS

Test materials are shipped to the ECP or to the AECP to arrive several days prior to the scheduled test date. Upon receipt of a shipment, the ECP, AECP, or designated staff should open the box as soon as possible to verify that the shipment is complete and then reseal and store the materials in a secure location until the test date.

The NBME must be notified immediately if a discrepancy in the number of test books is found at any time before, during, or after test administration, or if any breach in security is suspected.

The ECP/AECP may personally direct the test administration or release the exams to the department for administration. The ECP/AECP must assure that department staff administers the exam according to the procedures specified in the Chief Proctor’s Manual. The Chief Proctor’s Manual, included with each shipment, provides the information necessary to administer an IFOM exam according to standardized procedures and maintain security. This ensures that all examinees have the same opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the topics covered by the exam. Strict compliance with these instructions is required.

Test books are to be opened only by the examinee at the time of the administration. Faculty are not permitted to review used or unopened test books. An answer sheet is enclosed in each test book. Each examinee must write his/her name, a unique identification number, birth date, and test book number on the answer sheet. This information is needed to ensure accurate score reporting and to provide data for analyses. The Examinee Acknowledgement Statement at the top of the answer sheet must also be signed. Any unsigned statements will cause a delay in reporting scores.

WEB-BASED ADMINISTRATIONS

The NBME provides the tools necessary to administer a web-based exam in a secure, proctored setting. These features include:

- A centralized chief proctor resource site that provides resources to support all test administration tasks associated with the test administration cycle. This includes access to the Chief Proctor’s Manual, tutorials, a practice exam, and features for managing the test session online.

- Software that “locks down” the browser during testing, preventing examinees from accessing any other applications (such as e-mail or notepad), during the test session.

- An automated compatibility check that ensures every computer used for testing purposes is properly configured to deliver the exam.
Test Administration Support and Test Accommodations for Examinees

A variety of test delivery environments are supported: PC and Mac operating systems and laptops or fixed workstations. A complete listing of technical specifications can be found in the proctor resource site of the NBME Services Portal.

Also, it is possible to schedule multiple separate testing sessions on the same day or to run testing sessions in different buildings or at separate campuses at the same time.

**ADMINISTRATION SUPPORT**

**Paper and Pencil Examinations**

NBME staff will be available for test administration support for paper IFOM exams from 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, US Eastern Time, Monday to Friday. Please contact us at clienttestadmin@nbme.org or at (215) 590-9724.

**Web-based Examinations**

NBME staff will be available for test administration support at the time of your scheduled web-based exam to respond to technical or procedural issues that may arise.

If you have any questions during an administration, please contact us at nbmewebtest@nbme.org or at 215-590-9298.

**Note:** Exam support is not available on U.S. holidays.

**EXAMINEES WITH DISABILITIES**

Individuals with disabilities may be entitled to accommodations under law. If an examinee applies for test accommodations in the administration of an IFOM examination on the basis of a disability, the school will determine whether any accommodations are warranted, decide what specific accommodations may be reasonable for a particular examinee, and bear all costs associated with any such accommodation.

The NBME will make a good faith effort to provide such reasonable test accommodations that the school determines are warranted for the examinee. For additional information, contact us at IFOM@nbme.org.

**Requesting an Extra Time Web-based Examination**

Additional testing time forms may be generated upon request. Requests for additional time forms can be placed on the same order form as other exams. Those with visual impairments may use their own screen magnification software or use the browser’s text size feature to enlarge the font.
Examination Scoring

SCORING, SCALING, AND EQUATING

Scaled scores are the primary score scale for IFOM exams. These scores are statistically equated across exam administrations. Equating practices ensure that all scores have the same meaning on different forms of the same exam, despite potential differences in overall exam difficulty. Scores are scaled to a reference group of examinees from international medical schools who took the exam for the first time under standard conditions. Scaled scores provide a consistent way to measure performance on multiple exam forms administered at the same or different times.

RECOMMENDED INTERNATIONAL STANDARD OF COMPETENCE

Recommended international standards of competence for the IFOM BSE and CSE exams are set to approximate the USMLE Step 1 and Step 2 CK passing standards, respectively.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON GROUP

The NBME provides a variety of performance feedback on the IFOM exams in relation to an international comparison group of examinees. The criteria for inclusion in this group differ slightly for both the IFOM BSE and CSE based on the target population for each examination.

The international comparison group for the IFOM BSE includes a sample of examinees from Australia, Europe, and the Middle East taking the exam for the first time under standard conditions.

The international comparison group for the IFOM CSE includes a sample of examinees from Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and South America taking the exam during their final year of medical school and taking the exam for the first time under standard conditions.
Scoring Feedback

EXAMINEE SCORE REPORT

Each examinee will received a score report that includes the total test scaled score and performance profiles outlining areas of strength and weakness in each content area measured by the exam.

SCORE INTERPRETATION GUIDE

Detailed information about the composition and performance of the international comparison group, the IFOM score scale, and the relationship to the USMLE score scale is available online in a score interpretation guide:

IFOM BSE:
www.nbme.org/ifombse2016

IFOM CSE:
www.nbme.org/ifomcse2016

SCORE ROSTER

A roster of examinees with corresponding total test scaled scores will be provided to the medical school in both PDF and Excel formats.

PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

For an additional fee, schools can elect to receive detailed performance reports comparing the performance of their students with the international comparison group, and other groups of interest.* These reports highlight areas of strength and weakness in a medical school’s curriculum.

These optional reports include:

- School Performance Report
- School Norm Table Report
- School Boxplot Report
- School Performance by Cohort Report

*Note that there must be at least 20 students in a group to permit comparisons.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE REPORT

The School Performance Report includes a graphical summary of performance of your students on the total test and content areas using a box-and-whiskers plot.

SCHOOL NORM TABLE REPORT

The school norm table report provides normative information of your students, the international comparison group, and other comparison groups, if available.

SCHOOL BOXPLOT REPORT

The school boxplot report provides a graphical summary of performance of your students, the international comparison group, and other comparison groups, if available, using a box-and-whiskers plot.
**ACCESSING SCORE REPORTS ON NSP**

IFOM exam scores and related performance reports are available through the NSP after each test administration for both paper and web-based exams. Access to this feature can be assigned by your institution’s user account manager.

**IFOM exam scores will not be faxed or reported by telephone.**

**Paper and Pencil Examination Score Reports**

All score reports are ready within two weeks after the NBME receives the completed answer sheets. You will be given specific instructions for the return of answer sheets. Your reports will be posted online to NSP.

**Web-based Examination Score Reports**

Score reports are posted to NSP within two weeks following the close of a test session.

**SCORE REPORT PROCESSING**

**New Forms of Existing Examinations**

New forms are introduced periodically and go through a process of scaling, equating, and quality control before scores are posted. In order to complete this process, response data must be collected from initial administrations of the new form at several institutions. Score report posting usually occurs within four to six weeks of the close of these initial administrations. After the initial score report release of a new form, score reports are posted within the usual time frame for paper or web exams.

**New Examinations**

When NBME introduces new exams, scaled score reporting will be delayed for an indeterminate period of time until sufficient data have been collected. If deemed appropriate, percent correct scores will be reported until the process of scaling, equating, and quality control can be completed.
AGREEMENT ANALYSIS FOR IRREGULAR TESTING BEHAVIOR

An agreement analysis may be requested and conducted for a pair(s) of examinees suspected of irregular testing behavior, such as copying or collaboration. Agreement analysis is a statistical tool that can provide helpful, supportive information for the investigation of observed behaviors that may compromise the validity of examinees’ scores. The agreement analysis compares the degree of agreement that is observed between the incorrect responses of two examinees (pair) with the degree of agreement that would be expected to occur between two randomly chosen examinees taking the same examination independently. Agreement analysis uses only those items that both examinees in the pair answered incorrectly.

RESEARCH

Faculty may use performance data for curricular evaluation and medical education research from IFOM examinations. For information contact the NBME at (215) 590-9278 or IFOM@nbme.org.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The resources listed below are available online at www.nbme.org:

- Arranging for and administering an NBME web-based exam
- Best practices for web-based testing on wireless networks
- Fees, payment options and policies
- Sample score reports
- IFOM Practice Tests
- IFOM CSE self-assessment exam
Contact Us

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions. Various NBME staff can provide the information you need or help solve a problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NBME Contact List</th>
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| **Operational Support for Paper-based IFOM Exams**  
(questions about ordering exams, shipment of test materials and test administration) | clienttestadmin@nbme.org  
215-590-9298* |
| **Operational Support for Web-based IFOM Exams**  
(questions about ordering exams, uploading examinee rosters, and test delivery) | nbmewebtest@nbme.org  
215-590-9724 |
| **All Other Inquiries** | support@nbme.org |

* Note that telephone support for paper IFOM exams will be available from 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, US Eastern Time, Monday to Friday.