Setting pass marks for examinations
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Danny G.P. Mathysen
MSc. Biomedical Sciences
EBOD Assessment and Executive Officer

Antwerp University Hospital, Department of Ophthalmology
Wilrijkstraat 10, B-2650 Edegem, Belgium
E-mail: danny.mathysen@uza.be
Definition of pass mark

- Synonyms: standard, cutpoint
- A **pass mark** is a special score that serves as **boundary** between those who perform well enough and those who do not

![Score Range](image)

- How to set pass marks? Reaching a **consensus** rather than obtaining a scientifically correct solution
Importance of pass marks

- The purpose of an examination is to select the group of candidates that perform well enough (pass) and to eliminate the group of candidates that do not perform well enough (fail).

- In order to achieve this goal, a (limited) number of questions are presented to the candidates.

- The discriminative power of the examination will depend on the validity of the questions used.
Validity of questions

• Degree of difficulty of questions
  - Can be assessed by calculating the P-value (i.e. percentage of candidates answering correctly)

  **Thumb rule:**
  Avoid questions with P-value above 0.90 or below 0.10

• Degree of discriminative power of questions
  - Objective measurement of the degree to which the question is able to discriminate strong from weak candidates
  - Can be assessed by calculating the Rit/Rir value (correlation of question score to total examination score)

  **Thumb rule:**
  Avoid questions with Rit-value below 0.20
Types of pass marks

• “absolute” pass mark (criterion-reference)
  - expressed as a number (e.g. 70 correct responses) of test questions
  - expressed as a percentage (e.g. 70% correct responses) of test questions

  • how to determine reasonable criteria for candidates?
  • flexibility in case you are not familiar with the technique

• “relative” pass mark (norm-reference)
  - expressed as a number (e.g. 50 best performers) of examinees
  - expressed as a percentage (e.g. top 20% performers) of examinees

  • number of candidates • 40
  • candidates have to take the test on an individual basis
Types of pass marks

• **“absolute”** pass mark (criterion-reference)
  - No influence of the *caliber* of the total candidate population
  - It is possible that all candidates pass with high distinction / fail
  - A fair amount of *experience* is demanded to set the pass marks

• **“relative”** pass mark (norm-reference)
  - Very *easy to use* for examiners
  - Appropriate in *large candidate populations* (> 40) to be sure that the candidate population is representative

The grade of a candidate is determined by both *own achievement* and *achievements of all other candidates*

- Stimulation of *competition* between candidates
Angoff method to set pass marks

• First proposed by Angoff in 1971

• Prior to the examination, the probability of the questions to be answered correctly by a minimally competent candidate (candidate whose knowledge, skills and abilities are just enough) is estimated by several judges

• Based on the averaged estimates, an arbitrary (absolute) pass mark is set prior to the examination
Angoff method to set pass marks

- For a 250 test-item examination, a **minimal number of 10 judges** would be necessary in order to estimate the degree of difficulty of the test items with a minimal degree of error\(^1\)

- However, no consensus on minimal number of judges:
  - 5-10 judges (Norcini and Shea, 1997)
  - 10-15 judges (Hurtz and Hertz, 1999)
  - 5-30 judges (Zieky and Livingston, 1977)
  - As many judges as possible (Cizek, 1996)

Angoff method to set pass marks

• The concept of a borderline or minimally competent candidate has been found difficult to accurately define and understand by judges

• Candidate whose knowledge, skills and abilities are just enough

• Candidate who has an exactly 50:50 probability of passing or failing the examination

The borderline candidate is the marginal student: one who on some days might just barely pass your assessment but on other days might fail...
Norm-reference method to set pass marks

- Standard-setting **norm-reference method** determines the pass mark to be equal to average test score minus one standard deviation (indicated by educationalists).

- Comparison to Angoff method

- Angoff method: objective
  Norm-reference method: arbitrary
Norm-reference method to set pass marks

• Pass rate with Angoff method is significantly higher (100 percent in paper) than the pass rate with the Norm-reference method (85 percent in paper) (note: this was a 50 single-best answer item test with only 78 participants)

• Different standard setting methods result in different outcomes → clear definitions should be made in order to assure credibility, acceptability and defensibility of the chosen method
Some things to reflect on...

- What is the level of education? Is it possible that every candidate is able to pass (fail) the examination? (can be the case when using the Angoff method)

- Is an examination intended to definitely fail a certain percentage of candidates? (will be the case with the norm-reference method)

- In practice combinations of both techniques (absolute and relative) are often used
Definition of pass mark

- Synonyms: standard, cutpoint
- A **pass mark** is a special score that serves as **boundary** between those who perform well enough and those who do not

![Diagram of pass mark]

- How to set pass marks? Reaching a **consensus** rather than obtaining a scientifically correct solution
Setting pass marks for examinations

Example: European Board of Ophthalmology

Danny G.P. Mathysen
MSc. Biomedical Sciences
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Antwerp University Hospital, Department of Ophthalmology
Wilrijkstraat 10, B-2650 Edegem, Belgium
E-mail: danny.mathysen@uza.be
WELCOME TO THE EBO WEBSITE

The European Board of Ophthalmology (EBO) was founded in 1992 in London. It is a permanent working group of the Ophthalmology Subspecialty Section of the European Union of Medical Specialists (UEMS).

The Board has specifically been given the task of overseeing the standard of ophthalmology training. The National Delegates of the Board include clinicians and academicians with specific ophthalmological skills, expertise and a broad geographic distribution. Two delegates are nominated from each country of the European Union, Norway and Switzerland by the National Ophthalmological Societies. One delegate represents academic ophthalmology and one represents the professional practitioners. The delegates are chosen for a four-year term. One additional four-year term is permitted.

The EBO website can be found at www.ebo-online.org

Marko Hawlina President | Peter J. Ringens General Secretary | Kirsten Baggesen Treasurer

European Board of Ophthalmology | C/O Agenda, Temple House, Temple Road, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland
Tel: +353 12100058 | Fax: +353 12091112 | Email: Dara.Conlon@agenda-comm.ie
EBOD Examination: European standards

• Until 2003 only specialists could sit the examination

• Since 2004, the EBO examination has been opened for residents → official use by different countries to assess the level of education in ophthalmology of residents at the end of their training:
  - Replacement of national examination (Belgium, Switzerland)
  - Highly mandatory (France, Slovenia)
  - Highly recommended (Finland, The Netherlands)
EBOD Examination: European standards

Number of Candidates

- 2005: 74
- 2006: 159
- 2007: 224
- 2008: 284
- 2009: 308
EBOD Examination: Structure

• Written examination (2.5 hours) “MCQ”
  - 52 MCQs (260 true/false items)
  - Accounting for 40 percent of the total candidate score
  - Relative pass mark (average minus 1 standard deviation)
  - Conversion table to convert MCQ-score to a scale of 1-10

• Oral examination (1 hour) “Viva Voce”
  - 4 different topics (open questions) (equally rewarded)
  - Accounting for 60 percent of the total candidate score
  - Absolute pass mark (arbitrary pass mark of 6 out of 10)
  - Scores range on a scale of 4-10
EBOD Examination: Written part (MCQs)

• Selection of MCQs
  - Responsibility: EBO Education Committee
  - Selection based on pre-defined topics within ophthalmology
  - Broad indication of level of difficulty of the MCQs
    Easy - Intermediate - Difficult
  - If necessary: finetuning of the question

• Translation of MCQs
  - Under supervision of EBO Education Committee
  - Translation of the master MCQs (English) into German and French
  - Verification after translation to avoid differences due to translation
EBOD Examination: Written part (MCQs)

- On-site calculation of test scores
  - Speedwell Multquest analysis tool
  - In-house developed statistical analysis tool (written in R) for further preliminary statistical results (validation purposes) and score conversion
  - Until 2009: no negative marking
  - Introduction 2010: negative marking (true-false format of MCQs: guess factor)

- Question bank
  - Until 2009: “manual” question bank
  - Introduction 2010: electronic question bank (Speedwell QuestionBank) including statistical parameters of MCQs that have been used before
EBOD Examination: Written part (MCQs)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MCQ Mean ± SD</td>
<td>193 ± 15</td>
<td>189 ± 14</td>
<td>191 ± 15</td>
<td>184 ± 15</td>
<td>204 ± 13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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- Score conversion
  - Pass mark = 6

\[
6 = \frac{MCQ - score - SD}{MCQ - score}
\]

- Other marks derived based on mean MCQ-score and its standard deviation

- EBO MCQ-bank is not yet completely validated
- Pass rate remains comparable over the years
EBOD Examination: Written part (MCQs)

EBOD 2009 MCQ Scores
with 95% Confidence Intervals

Residents (220)

Specialists (88)

Total Score
EBOD Examination: Oral part (Viva Voce)

• Principle
  - Each Viva Voce is seen as to be a discussion among specialists in ophthalmology between the candidate and two examiners
  - Four topics with two examiners for each topic
    → each candidate is examined by eight different examiners

  • Different examiners → different questions
  • Different languages (English, mother tongue, ...)
  • However, statistical analysis has indicated that the results of the Viva Voce are very well correlated, also with the written part (MCQs) of the examination
EBOD Examination: Oral part (Viva Voce)

- Questions
  - Examples of questions are provided to the examiners prior to the examination
  - Based on these examples each examiner will develop their own questions
  - Based on photographs or small video's on relevant clinical cases

Topics covered during Viva Voce examination:

- Topic A: Optics, Strabismus, and Neuro-ophthalmology
- Topic B: Cornea, External diseases, Orbit, and Ocular adnexa
- Topic C: Glaucoma, Cataract, and Refractive surgery
- Topic D: Posterior segment, Ocular inflammation, and Uveitis
EBOD Examination: Oral part (Viva Voce)

EBOD 2009 Viva Voce Scores
with 95% Confidence Intervals

- Residents (220)
- Specialists (88)

Total Score

5  6  7  8  9  10
EBOD Examination: Score calculation

\[ TTS = (0.4 \times \text{MCQ}) + \sum_{i=1}^{4} (0.15 \times \text{VV}_i) \]

- Total examination score
  - MCQ-test accounts for 40 percent of total test score
  - Viva Voce scores account for the remaining 60 percent of total test score
  - Arbitrary pass mark of 6 out of 10 on the calculated total test score

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<tr>
<td>Success Rate</td>
<td>87.6%</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td>89.2%</td>
<td>90.8%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EBOD Examination: Score calculation

EBOD 2009 Total Scores Residents
with 95 % Confidence Intervals

Other (24)
The Netherlands (7)
Switzerland (29)
Slovenia (5)
Greece (11)
Germany (39)
France (85)
Belgium (21)

Total Score
EBOD Examination: Score calculation

EBOD 2009 Total Scores Specialists with 95% Confidence Intervals

- Other (20)
- Turkey (5)
- Spain (16)
- Greece (9)
- Germany (20)
- France (12)

Total Score
European Board of Ophthalmology exam

EBOD 2009 Total Scores
with 95 % Confidence Intervals

- Residents (220)
- Specialists (88)
Thank You