

About Royal College applied examinations

Applied examinations remain a cornerstone of the certification process for most Royal College primary specialties, as well as many subspecialties, in assessing candidate physicians against established standards. Applied examinations continue to provide

- evaluation of clinical reasoning and decision-making skills,
- supportive evidence that candidates meet established standards for safe and effective patient care, and
- direct observation of competencies that cannot be fully assessed through written exams alone.

While the ongoing transition to competency-based training and other emerging factors such as artificial intelligence may result in changes to our exams, the current Royal College assessment strategy, supported through consultations with Examination and Assessment Committees, as well as Exam Board chairs and other key partners, will continue to include the delivery of some form of applied assessment into the foreseeable future.

Stabilization of the applied exam

Since introducing virtual applied exams in 2020, several destabilizing and disruptive events such as internet and power failures have threatened the delivery of specific applied examinations across the country. Moving forward, there is near certainty of recurrences given the reliance on critical factors such as connectivity and power for these exams to be successful. While infrequent, the impact when such failures occur is extremely high. Residents' careers are impacted as they risk up to a full year delay in their certification.

There are also significant logistics and cost impacts associated with having to reschedule an exam, and there are other compounding impacts caused generally by the disruption of the exam program. For example, delivery of virtual applied exams relies on the annual management of many extenuating factors, including securing individual exam rooms to accommodate ranges of exam cohort sizes; harnessing sophisticated IT infrastructure to coordinate delivery of synchronous examinations across 20 centres; renewing numerous vendor contracts; and balancing the imperative to maintain quality against the reality of cost and resource volatility. Pre-emptive scheduling of back-up examinations would drastically increase costs for the Royal College and candidates.

Centralizing applied exam delivery in Ottawa is intended to stabilize expenses by reducing the Royal College dependence on vendor contracts for space and technology as well as limiting technology and infrastructure requirements to one space instead of 20 separate locations. The decision provides stability and control over critical variables to deliver quality exams for many years to come.

The transition to an in-person centralized model is required to stabilize the delivery of the applied exam over time. In-person centralized applied exams aims to

- improve the exam day experience for both candidates and examiners;



- stabilize costs, reduce risk of technological failure, and enhance quality control;
- responsibly oversee human and financial resources; and
- strengthen examiner and Exam Board relationships.

The transition to in-person applied exams

Starting with the spring 2025 session, select disciplines are sitting the applied exam in the Toronto-based Touchstone Institute and the Ottawa-based Royal College Annex building.

The remaining spring 2025 disciplines with delivery requirements that could not be accommodated by the Toronto or Ottawa locations are remaining virtual and decentralized.

For the fall 2025 applied session, all disciplines have been accommodated to sit the fall 2025 exam in either Toronto or Ottawa. Details for 2026 applied exams will be shared as soon as they are available.

The new centralized assessment centre at 160 Elgin Street will enable a permanent approach and home for Royal College applied examinations going forward. The centre is expected to host the first exam session as early as 2027.

Cost and travel considerations

Royal College examinations cost more to deliver than the revenue generated in exam fees. These costs are subsidized by the Royal College and are further reduced by the Fellows who volunteer to develop and run the examinations. Moving from virtual to in-person applied exams reduces an added layer of expenses and cost volatility, which makes their delivery more sustainable over the long term.

Given Canada's sizable geography, consideration to candidates and examiners travelling from other regions was a significant factor in the decision to move to a centralized assessment centre in Ottawa.

It is also of note that according to [2023 CAPER data](#), approximately 78 per cent of candidates and examiners live within a two-hour drive of the Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal corridor. Ottawa is a central location for the largest groups of travellers. It is the headquarters of the Royal College and therefore supports logistics and cost savings, and it can serve the needs of both Anglophone and Francophone candidates.

Status quo for the Royal College written exam

The risks identified for the applied exam do not apply to the over 3,900 written exams, which will remain decentralized and delivered at regional exam sites across Canada. We recognize that the planned centralization of applied exams will create an additional travel burden for some candidates, and therefore we are committed to minimizing candidate travel and expenses for written exams.

We invite you to contact us with any questions at candidates@royalcollege.ca.