

GUIDELINES TO PREPARE FOR THE NATIONAL BOARD EXAMINATION FOR CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

This guideline is written for trainee and previously registered Clinical Psychologists who are obliged to write the National Board Examination to demonstrate their command of the competencies of Clinical Psychology. The guideline is divided into four parts as follows:

1. Preparing for the National Board Examination for Clinical Psychology
2. The Scope of the Examination Paper
3. Recommended Reading
4. Writing the Examination

In addition to this guidance, please ensure that you familiarise yourself with the [Examination Policy for Psychologists, Registered Counsellors and Psychometrists \(Form 255\)](#).

Preparing for the National Board Examination for Clinical Psychology

It is important that you take time to prepare for the National Board Examination and not simply rely on your learning from your academic and internship years.

To prepare adequately for the Board Examination for Clinical Psychology, you should be able to demonstrate a good understanding of professional identity of Clinical Psychology and demonstrate that you can apply your professional knowledge as a Clinical Psychologist to relevant cases in an ethical manner.

The format of the paper, therefore, is usually in the form of one or more written case studies followed by a variety of questions that require you to demonstrate that you can appropriately apply your knowledge. You may be required to describe and resolve any ethical issues, provide a diagnosis and/or case formulation, and discuss how you would intervene as a Clinical Psychologist. There may be other questions that test your knowledge of the scope and professional identity of Clinical Psychology.

The Scope of the Examination Paper

The scope of the examination paper is determined by the Board's definition of Clinical Psychology and list of competencies of Clinical Psychology, both of which have been recently updated.

The definition of clinical psychology, which should always inform your approach to psychological assessment, diagnosis, formulation and intervention, is as follows:

Clinical psychology is a specialist category within professional psychology that provides continuing and comprehensive mental and behavioural healthcare to individuals and groups across the lifespan. This includes the assessment, diagnosis, evaluation, and treatment of psychological and mental health disorders that range from mild to severe and complex. Psychological assessment, diagnosis and formulation are based on biological, social and psychological factors. Clinical psychologists deliver a range of high-intensity psychological interventions with demonstrated effectiveness in treating mental health disorders.

The Board for Psychology's mandate to protect the public means that the emphasis of the Examination should be on the areas that involve direct contact with vulnerable clients. Therefore, of the eight areas of competency, the examination will be confined to (1) Psychological Assessment, (2) Psychological Intervention, (3) Professional Practice and (7) Ethics and (8) Legislation. (For a complete list of competencies, please consult the document, [Minimum standards for the training of Clinical Psychology.](#)) available on the HPCSA website.

Psychological Assessment

Clinical psychologists should have the ability to use psychological assessment to conceptualise, diagnose, plan and monitor therapeutic processes and outcomes by:

- a. Using a range of psychometric and other psychological procedures, including systematic interviewing to establish the presence of clinical signs and symptoms of psychological distress.
- b. Assessing the neuro-cognitive, personality and emotional functioning of adults and children.
- c. Performing comprehensive mental status assessment in combination with the use of formal diagnostic classification systems.
- d. Diagnosing a broad range of psychiatric disorders and psychological disorders.
- e. Communicating effectively psychological findings to a variety of recipients in different formats.
- f. Performing neuropsychological and psycho-legal assessments
- g. Recognizing the need for further investigations and refer to other disciplines.

Psychological Interventions

Clinical Psychologists should have the ability to develop theoretical and aetiological formulations in order to:

- a. Apply psychological interventions to people (individuals, groups, families) with psychiatric, medical and neurocognitive conditions.
- b. Perform a range of psychological interventions with individuals and groups, including adults and children, based on a diversity of psychological theories.
- c. Identify, understand and promote coping with psychological distress and life challenges.
- d. Identify psychological emergencies and intervene.
- e. Enhance mental health functioning of individuals, groups, families and communities.
- f. Work in different contexts e.g. community, medical and/ or mental health settings and implement appropriate evidence-based interventions.
- g. Apply a range of intensive, long-term interventions as well as short-term, supportive, psycho-educational interventions. (Specific interventions will vary by settings in which clinical psychologists operate, and according to the scope of practice).
- h. Have knowledge of the theory and practice of more than three evidence based models of psychological therapy.

Professional Practice

Clinical Psychologists should:

- a. Adhere to their scope of practice and where indicated and refer clients/ patients to relevant professionals accompanied by appropriate referral reports.
- b. Be able to identify and liaise with locally available resources and facilities for clients/ patients with particular needs.
- c. Have the ability to conduct various aspects of psychological practice and research in a manner that is cognizant of and sensitive to diversity (e.g. socioeconomic status, language, culture, race, gender, disability, sexual orientation).
- d. Understand and apply relevant aspects of legislation.
- e. Perform psychological practice and research in contexts such as those related to clinical, health psychology and neuropsychological matters.
- f. Have competence in the management of client/patient information.
- g. Establish protocols and contracts with clients/patients (individuals, groups, organizations, government departments).
- h. Have knowledge of psychopharmacology and basic non-invasive clinical skills.
- i. Communicates clearly using verbal and written skills in a professional context, demonstrates clear understanding and use of professional language which will also be used in a court of law.
- j. Demonstrate knowledge of assessment for forensic purposes.
- k. Work in a multi-disciplinary team by way of making psychological contributions in the discussions.
- l. Demonstrate familiarity and knowledge of medical terminology and first aid.
- m. Demonstrate knowledge in the planning, establishment, and management of a business practice.

Ethics

- a. Clinical Psychologists have a thorough knowledge of the code of professional ethics of the HPCSA and the Professional Board for Psychology.
- b. Clinical Psychologists have the ability to conduct all aspects of psychological practice and research in accordance with guidelines for professional practice of the HPCSA and the Professional Board for Psychology

Legislation

- a. Knowledge of relevant legislative frameworks which impact on psychological practice and research.
- b. Ability to conduct research and practice in accordance with these legislative parameters.

Recommended Reading

The following list is not exhaustive. It is recommended that you consult both National and international readings that will help you to prepare adequately for the National Board Examination and demonstrate knowledge of the core competencies identified above:

- [Burke, A. \(Ed\). \(2009\). Abnormal psychology: A South African perspective. Oxford University Press: Goodwood.](#)
- [Pillay, A.L., Ahmed, R. & Bawa, U. \(2013\). Clinical psychology training in South Africa: A call to action. SAJP, 43\(1\), 46 – 58.](#)
- [Bennett, P. \(2011\). Abnormal and clinical psychology: An introductory textbook. \(3rd Ed\). Open University Press: England.](#)
- [Choo, C.C., & Ho, R.C. \(2005\). Clinical psychology casebook across the lifespan. \(2nd Ed\). Springer: Singapore.](#)
- [Sadock, B.J., Sadock, V.A., & Ruiz, P. \(2015\). Kaplan and Sadock's synopsis of psychiatry: behavioural sciences/clinical psychiatry. \(11th Ed\). Wolters Kluwer: New York.](#)

To practice ethically in South Africa, you should be able to demonstrate sound knowledge of the relevant HPCSA policies. These include the following:

- The ethical code for Psychologists. This includes two documents: The first is the [Ethical Rules of Conduct for Practitioners Registered under the Health Professions Act, 1974](#) that applies to all registered health professionals, and the second is [Annexure 12 - Rules of Conduct Pertaining Specifically to the Profession of Psychology](#).
- It is essential that you make sure that you are very familiar with the ethical code to practice ethically in South Africa. The ethical readings can and should be complemented but never replaced by other sources. Good complementary readings include the work of Alfred Allan and others (E.g., [Allan, A. \(2016\). Law and Ethics in Psychology: An International Perspective \(3rd Ed.\). Place: Inter-Ed](#)).

- You should also be familiar with the [List of Classified Tests \(Form 207\)](#), and understand the purpose of test classification, which is described in the [Policy on the Classification of Psychometric Measuring Devices, Instruments, Methods and Techniques \(Form 208\)](#).
- Other important HPCSA policies that could be covered in the Exam include the revised [Policy Document on Business Practices](#).
- As Clinical Psychologists, you should understand and appreciate the mental health and psychological implications of the HIV pandemic and be familiar with the [HPCSA Good Practice Guide \(HIV\)](#).

Ethical practice should also comply with the laws of the country in which you will work. Candidates should familiarise themselves with the relevant sections of the following National legislation:

- [Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 108 of 1996](#). This chapter is the Bill of Rights that enshrines the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom. Psychological Acts must always be conducted in a manner that is consistent with the Bill of Rights.
- Also relevant is the [National Health Act, 61 of 2003](#) that provides a framework for a structured uniform health system within the Republic, taking into account the obligations imposed by the Constitution and other laws on the national, provincial and local governments with regard to health services.
- It is advisable that you familiarise yourself with the [Health Professions Act, 56 of 1974](#) that established the Health Professions Council of South Africa and the Professional Boards to provide for control over the education, training and registration for and practising of registered Health Professions.
- [The Children's Act, 38 of 2005](#) governs all the laws relating to the care and protection of children and is therefore very relevant to the practice of Clinical Psychology. Similarly, the [Child Justice Act, 75 of 2008](#) specifies the laws that apply to accused children.
- All practising Psychologists should understand the legal aspects with regard to mentally ill offenders in South Africa, and so you should be familiar with the relevant sections of the [Criminal Procedure Act, 51 of 1977](#).
- [Section 8 of the Employment Equity Act, 55 of 1998](#) refers to psychological testing in the workplace, which you should know. Though written for the workplace, the requirements are applicable in many other contexts. Indeed, make sure that you appreciate the use and potential abuse of psychological instruments in our multicultural, post-apartheid era.
- The influx of competency examination requests for sexual abuse complainants, in accordance with the [Criminal Law \(Sexual Offences and Related Matters\) Amendment Act 32 of 2007 \(Republic of South Africa, 2007\)](#), necessitates that clinical psychologists should be familiar with this Act.

There are many readings that you may want to consult to prepare yourself to answer questions on psychometric assessment. The following text is a good resource and freely available:

- [Psychological Assessment in South Africa: Research and applications](#), edited by S. Laher & K. Cockcroft (Eds.) and published by Wits University Press in 2013. The text is open access and can be freely downloaded <http://oapen.org/search?identifier=1004362>

You should be able to demonstrate very good knowledge of the major diagnostic systems:

- The Fifth Edition of the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders \(DSM-5\)](#) (you should know too that this is one of two systems, and in practice you should also be familiar with the International Classification of Disease, Eleventh Revision (ICD-11), particularly where it deviates from the DSM-5). Clinical Psychologists are expected to have particular expertise in dealing with mental and behavioural disorders.

Case studies form an important part of the National Board Examination and bring life to the clinical disorders that you may encounter in your practice. Questions will elicit your ability to integrate theoretical, clinical, ethical and legislative knowledge in the assessment, diagnosis, formulation, treatment and rehabilitation of mental health problems.

Clinical psychologists generally work in psychiatric hospitals where there may be special units for eating disorders, substance use disorders, adolescent unit, forensic unit, geriatric unit, acute unit, therapeutic unit and chronic unit. Diagnostic questions will thus be formulated to elicit your understanding, knowledge of the diagnostic criteria and the treatment for moderate to severe pathology which may include some of the following: (i) Bipolar and related disorders; (ii) Personality disorders; (iii) Dissociative disorders; (iv) Neurocognitive disorders; (v) Schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders.

You are free to draw from a range of recognised evidence-based therapeutic interventions to answer questions related to case formulation. Ensure that you demonstrate sound clinical and ethical judgement in the selection and application of these therapeutic approaches. Clinical psychologists should be able to adapt interventions to meet the unique needs of each client. Always consider the relevant social, cultural, political and economic factors.

Clinical psychologists also work in a general hospital setting therefore remember that they may be called upon to assess and treat clients presenting with a variety of physical conditions. Such conditions range from acute injuries, endocrine disorders, HIV, chronic pain to terminal illnesses. Emotional problems and behavioural dysfunctions may arise due to these medical conditions and you may be expected to provide psychological input regarding the treatment and rehabilitation.

The current restructuring of the health-care system along primary health-care lines and proposals such as the National Health Insurance call upon clinical psychologists to explore most economical ways to deliver psychological services. You may thus be asked questions related to short-term interventions such as crisis intervention.

Writing the Examination

Though you will by now have successfully written many exams in your life, it is always good to approach the paper carefully and systematically. Arrive early, so that you do not put yourself under any unnecessary stress. Check that you have been given the correct paper (it has happened that candidates have written the paper for another category). Make sure that you read the instructions, case studies and the questions very carefully. Examinations are stressful, and it is easy to misread a question or miss an important detail in the case study.

Manage your time carefully. Often when candidates fail the exam, it is because they did not manage to complete all the questions. Allocate time to each section according to their proportional values; If, for example, a question is worth 25 marks out of 100, you should spend no more than a quarter of your time on it, which for a three-hour exam, is 45 minutes.

Spend a few minutes to structure your answers rather than immediately responding and always try to leave enough time at the end to review your answers carefully.

Good luck.

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