

Structured references, the supporter role and final readiness

Choose referees with direct knowledge, use supporters within clear boundaries and make a defensible submit-or-delay decision.

- ✓ 18 min reading
- ✓ Full teaching, practical next steps and reflection
- ✓ Six practice questions with answers and explanations
- ✓ Complete source list and jurisdiction notes

Prepared for SAS, locally employed and other UK doctors

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Using this module

Independent education

This is general professional information, not individual clinical, legal, employment, immigration, regulatory, tax or pensions advice. Current official instructions and the circumstances of the individual case remain controlling. Practice scores do not establish professional competence or accreditation.

The short answer

Structured references corroborate the portfolio; they do not replace missing primary evidence. Current GMC policy sets a minimum of three, but applicants must follow the live specialty guidance and GMC Online requirements. Referees should know the applicant's current work directly and cover the full scope. A supporter helps coordinate and challenge readiness without guaranteeing success.

Three next actions

- Map proposed referees against specialty scope, recency, direct observation and conflicts.
- Give referees accurate role information and the GMC process, without scripting conclusions.
- Hold a formal readiness review that can honestly decide submit, delay or redesign.

Learning objectives

- Select and brief suitable structured referees.
- Define the supporter and Responsible Officer boundaries.
- Apply a comprehensive final readiness test.

Use the current reference requirement

The GMC structured-reference policy published for Portfolio Pathway applications states a minimum of three structured references. Some older support pages may quote different ranges. The live GMC Online application, current specialty-specific guidance and any direct GMC clarification should control at submission.

More references are not automatically better. They should collectively cover current scope and provide direct, specific, credible observations. Avoid choosing people only because of senior titles.

- Check the live number and format.
- Cover scope rather than prestige.
- Resolve conflicting secondary guidance.

Choose people with direct knowledge

A useful referee has worked closely enough with the applicant to describe current competence, scope and professional behaviour. Together, referees should cover clinical breadth and generic capabilities. Explain periods and contexts of contact.

A senior person with little direct observation may be less helpful than an appropriately qualified colleague who has assessed sustained work. Declare relevant relationships or conflicts and follow GMC eligibility requirements.

- Prioritise direct observation.
- Cover the whole scope collectively.
- Declare relationships and limits.

Brief without coaching

Give referees the GMC form, submission specialty, dates and factual role summary. Remind them to use direct knowledge, specific examples and honest limitations. Confirm practical availability for GMC contact.

Do not draft praise for signature, hide concerns or ask for identical language. If a referee cannot support a claim, treat that as information for the gap analysis rather than pressure them.

- Provide facts and process.
- Invite honest, specific evidence.
- Never script conclusions.

The supporter and Responsible Officer

A supporter can help interpret the project, coordinate organisational evidence, review gaps and liaise where the applicant authorises the GMC to speak with them. The GMC provides specific information for Responsible Officers and supporters. Support does not transfer the applicant's responsibility for accuracy.

The Responsible Officer's statutory and organisational role is distinct from mentorship or personal representation. Confirm what they can do, what remains confidential and whether they have any later decision-making role that creates a conflict.

- Define the support remit.
- Authorise GMC contact only knowingly.
- Manage role conflicts.

Use readiness gates

A defensible submission requires confirmed eligibility and specialty; current curriculum and guidance; every outcome mapped; genuine experience gaps closed; current assessed evidence; anonymisation and verification complete; suitable references; consistent CV/application; fee and timing understood; and a post-decision plan.

Classify each gate as pass, conditional or stop. Conditional items need an owner and date. A stop item—such as absent required breadth or unresolved eligibility—should usually delay submission.

- Use objective gates.
 - Name conditions and owners.
 - Allow a decision to delay.
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Hold a final challenge review

Ask reviewers to test a sample from each domain and identify what cannot be concluded from the evidence. Include a specialty-informed reviewer and an administrative/confidentiality check. Record uncertainties rather than converting encouragement into certainty.

The final decision belongs to the applicant. A delay can protect cost and outcome if it closes a material gap; endless perfectionism can also be harmful. Use the readiness gates and current advice to distinguish the two.

- Sample all domains.
 - Separate encouragement from evidence.
 - Balance material gaps against perfectionism.
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Common mistake

Avoid this

Selecting prestigious referees who cannot describe direct current work can leave important capabilities unsupported despite impressive names.

Pause and reflect

Which proposed referee can describe each major part of your current scope from direct knowledge?

Takeaways

- Follow current GMC reference requirements, not an inherited number.
- References corroborate direct evidence and should cover current scope.
- A readiness review must be allowed to recommend delay when a material gap remains.

Knowledge check

Choose one best answer. These practice questions support reflection; they do not assess a real case or confer accreditation. Answer positions match the browser edition.

1. An older support page says four to six referees while current GMC policy says a minimum of three. What should control?

- A. The oldest page
- B. The lower number regardless of specialty
- C. Any previous applicant's experience
- D. Current GMC Online and specialty-specific requirements, with clarification if needed

2. Who is likely to provide the stronger reference?

- A. A manager with a senior title but insufficient knowledge of the relevant clinical work
- B. A friend using a template
- C. A famous clinician who met the applicant once
- D. A qualified supervisor who directly observed sustained relevant practice

3. A referee says they cannot comment on emergency work. What is the best response?

- A. Use another suitable referee or evidence source for that scope
- B. Ask them to guess
- C. Write the paragraph for them
- D. Omit emergency work

4. Can a supporter guarantee a successful decision?

- A. Yes, if they are the Responsible Officer
- B. Yes, if they sign every file
- C. Yes, after a local panel
- D. No; they can coordinate and challenge, but the GMC assesses the evidence

5. A required capability remains absent two weeks before submission. What is the safest readiness decision?

- A. Submit because the fee is ready
- B. Map an unrelated certificate
- C. Ask a referee to cover it
- D. Delay or redesign rather than submit an acknowledged material gap

6. What is the purpose of a final challenge review?

- A. To expose unsupported assumptions and test navigation before submission
- B. To replace GMC evaluation
- C. To certify success
- D. To obtain unanimous praise

Answers and explanations

1. D — Current GMC Online and specialty-specific requirements, with clarification if needed

Current GMC Online and specialty-specific requirements, with clarification if needed This follows the principle explained in “Use the current reference requirement”.

Re-read “Use the current reference requirement” and write down the evidence or decision you would need before acting.

2. D — A qualified supervisor who directly observed sustained relevant practice

A qualified supervisor who directly observed sustained relevant practice This follows the principle explained in “Choose people with direct knowledge”.

Re-read “Choose people with direct knowledge” and write down the evidence or decision you would need before acting.

3. A — Use another suitable referee or evidence source for that scope

Use another suitable referee or evidence source for that scope This follows the principle explained in “Brief without coaching”.

Re-read “Brief without coaching” and write down the evidence or decision you would need before acting.

4. D — No; they can coordinate and challenge, but the GMC assesses the evidence

No; they can coordinate and challenge, but the GMC assesses the evidence This follows the principle explained in “The supporter and Responsible Officer”.

Re-read “The supporter and Responsible Officer” and write down the evidence or decision you would need before acting.

5. D — Delay or redesign rather than submit an acknowledged material gap

Delay or redesign rather than submit an acknowledged material gap This follows the principle explained in “Use readiness gates”.

Re-read “Use readiness gates” and write down the evidence or decision you would need before acting.

6. A — To expose unsupported assumptions and test navigation before submission

To expose unsupported assumptions and test navigation before submission This follows the principle explained in “Hold a final challenge review”.

Re-read “Hold a final challenge review” and write down the evidence or decision you would need before acting.

Official and professional sources

Confirm the current source version and applicable nation, contract, scheme or specialty. A source list is not a statement that every rule applies to every reader.

GMC policy on structured references

UK ·

https://www.gmc-uk.org/cdn/documents/policy---sat---portfolio-pathway---policy-on-structured-references---dc21070_pdf-105652252.pdf

GMC: Information for Responsible Officers and supporters

UK · https://www.gmc-uk.org/cdn/documents/portfolio-pathway-applications---information-for-responsible-officers---dc21350_pdf-104695809.pdf

GMC: specialist/GP registration overview and application route finder

UK · <https://www.gmc-uk.org/registration-and-licensing/join-our-registers/applying-for-specialist-or-gp-registration>

Scotland Deanery: Portfolio Pathway for SAS grades

Scotland · <https://www.scotlanddeanery.nhs.scot/your-development/specialist-and-associate-specialist-doctors-and-dentists/portfolio-pathway-for-sas-grades-formerly-cesr/>

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