



Anatomy of applying to medical schools in the UK

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This article is one of the series on studying medicine in the UK. If you want to know more about applying to medicine and how best to prepare for a successful application/admission, please visit the highly rated MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) the academics at the University of Glasgow created: <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/study-medicine>

The course is 3 week-long and is free to complete. It is designed to help applicants from various educational backgrounds find accessible and reliable information in one place. It contains articles on topics as wide as: 'how do I know if I want to be a doctor?' to 'ok, I graduated - what is next?'

I hope that you will enjoy the course and find it useful.

Tips on choosing a medical school

Once you've made a decision that medicine is definitely the career that you want to pursue, and you know that you are likely to meet the academic requirements for entry, the next step is to research well which medical school to apply to and where you would want to spend the next 5-6 years.

Researching the different medical schools early on in the process is important for various reasons:

- 1) to get an idea of what is expected from you as an applicant, so you can tailor your application accordingly and choose the schools that match your strength;
- 2) know about the course structure and the teaching methods employed; you may have an idea how you study best, so it is important that you choose a school with the teaching style that you prefer and that suits you best;
- 3) the length of the study – the standard entry course is 5 years, graduate entry is 4 years and courses with a compulsory Intercolated degree are 6 years;
- 4) it is important to choose the location of the School as well – you will spend 5-6 years in a place of your choice and various issues such as sociability, sport and music scene as well as safety and comfort of the place you will settle on cannot be overlooked! It is important to consider, for instance, living cost, availability of good, affordable accommodation, and the vicinity of medical school to the hospital sites you will be training at.

The majority of UK medical schools have minimum academic requirements that you will need to meet in order to apply. You will not be given extra credits if you do better than the minimum required, therefore it might be wise to concentrate on the subjects you need and

can safely achieve the required grades in rather than take more subjects and risk not getting a sufficient number of the high grades needed. If you are concerned your qualifications might be slightly low, you should check carefully through the requirements of all medical schools - [this resource](#) lists the school in the UK and the document is regularly updated, so it is a good idea to make an informed choice and play to your strengths.

You may choose to take a traditional course with a clear division between 2-to-3 pre-clinical years and the subsequent clinical years (Oxford and Cambridge Universities have traditional course structures, for example). Traditional courses are lecture-based and you will be taught the scientific foundations of, for example, Physiology, Anatomy and Biochemistry in the first 2-3 years, followed by application of the acquired knowledge when you move to clinical teaching formats. There may still be some lectures and tutorials in small groups at this stage, but they will be complementary to the clinical training you receive in that phase of your medical education. A traditional course thus gives you a strong grounding in the sciences that underpin medical practice, i.e. good academic training, but it also involves lots of exams and essay writing to assess performance in those years.

The 'newer' courses are integrated with clinical exposure early on, meaning that scientific knowledge is delivered alongside clinical training. Such a course may involve elements of problem-based learning (PBL) as well. You can read about PBL in week 2 and watch part of a live PBL session in Glasgow. The main difference between the traditional and more modern courses is that teaching on modern courses is more integrated and 'systems'-based, as students cover the anatomy, physiology and clinical and communication skills relevant to a given 'system' in question (e.g. liver, nervous system) in one block. This way you get the information on that system from the various disciplines in a way designed to promote a more complete understanding before moving to the next system. This makes learning interesting and as close as can be to the 'real' life medical experience early on. It must be said however that some students might feel overwhelmed when confronted with patients before they feel they know enough. It is a steep learning curve, but students adapt well and quickly become confident and learn important skills necessary in their future careers – both, self-directed learning and team working.

An integrated course may involve a fair amount of PBL, where lectures will be supplementary, rather than the focus of the concurrent PBL sessions. Alternatively the course may have a lighter PBL component (with relatively few PBLs underpinned by lectures to support learning), or even none at all. Some medical schools also use Team-Based Learning (TBL), so it is important to find out what learning modalities (or the combination of) a course uses - ask questions when you attend Open Days or read prospectus/phone/email the university and ask them for any information you need if you can't visit them - it is important to make the right decision!

One more thing to consider when choosing your medical school is to ask about what extra choices are available to students (for example, student-selected components or elective studies or an intercalated degree year) as well as what opportunities there are for engaging in research, attending student conferences or taking part in exchange programmes to attend a university abroad for a teaching block. It is hard to think about all these choices

before even starting university, but try to go to Open Days and talk it over with the staff and students that you meet there, and take the time to think it all over.

Basic components of applying

There are three basic components to applying for a place in Medical School in the UK once you have the required grades: your personal statement (encompassing work experience and extracurricular activities), the University Clinical Aptitude Test (UCAT) and interviews. Remember that different universities place varying importance on each of these three - so it's worth taking time to consider what your strengths are and playing to those.

Getting the required grades is often the first hurdle you will face - grade requirements for medical schools are notably high and it may be that you have to look at other options (e.g., getting a degree first) if you don't meet these requirements the first time round.

Once you have the grades in place, you'll want to think about your personal statement. The key thing to remember is that the admissions tutors aren't just looking for long impressive lists of everything you have ever done - they want to see how these experiences have informed your desire to become a doctor and how they demonstrate you have the right personal qualities for the profession. The thing to remember also is that not every medical school puts emphasis on personal statements – some will only read them, while others will score these and factor them in when they rank your application.

The other component of your application will be aptitude test score (UCAT, BMAT or GAMSAT, depending on which school you will be applying to), an assessment which is designed to test your suitability for a career in medicine (please note, BMAT will be discontinued from 2023). Although there are some personal attributes which are difficult to change, there are ways you can do to prepare yourself for these tests – the talks about these steps in more details.

Finally, you will hopefully make it to the interview stage – this is your chance to convince the admissions interviewers that you have what it takes! You must remember - they are not looking for a perfect candidate; they just want to see a candidate with a genuine informed desire to become a doctor and who has an insight into the rewards and challenges of the profession.

Our MOOC (<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/study-medicine>) will look at each of these three components in more details if you would like to visit, but is important to note that while our information will mostly concentrate on Scottish schools, the MSC's guidance on Entry requirements for UK medical schools will inform you about requirements of each of the medical schools in the country: <https://www.medschools.ac.uk/news/2023-entry-requirements-for-uk-medical-schools-published>

The next chapter will be to know whether work experience is compulsory or about how to succeed at interviews – please head to the MOOC highlighted earlier. It also introduces you to a sample medical course and takes you beyond university into the world of the NHS; especially of interest to all potential applicants will be a chapter on medical training – what

does the journey from a student to a consultant look like and what to know about before choosing a specialty to train in.

Enjoy!