



MEDICAL SCHOOL APPLICATION GUIDE

This was written in 2020 and my experience was for applying for entry in 2020. Specific details may have changed by the time you read this however the majority of information will still apply. Don't forget to look at your chosen university's individual websites for up to date information.

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Choosing a Medical School/University that Suits You

Firstly, it is important to understand that a medical degree is a medical degree regardless of which university you study at. Unlike other courses such as law, your employability will not be affected by the university that you receive your degree from. Following successful completion of the course, to practise medicine you need to register with the General Medical Council (GMC) in order to progress to the foundation years. The criteria are the same for every applicant so there is no preferential treatment depending on your university. Overall, this gives you a much larger scope of choice for factors that you can use to make your decision.

Make sure that you attend open days available and book them in advance. The staff will be on hand to answer any questions you may have and you can get a good feel for the city, the university, and the students. You will likely be spending a minimum of 5 years studying medicine so not only is the course structure important but the city as well; you will be living there for a significant period of time. Also, just because you are studying medicine doesn't mean you won't have any free-time, if anything you need to make sure that you have hobbies unrelated to the course so that you don't burnout. Look at what's available in the city/university in terms of societies, sport, support as well as the course.

Unlike other courses, you can only apply to 4 universities to study medicine however you can apply to study a different course using your 5th option.

Course Types

There are 3 main course types offered by different UK universities:

- Traditional Course – this involves pre-clinical years (typically 2-3 years) in which you learn the theory of medicine in set modules (covering anatomy, physiology, biochemistry etc.) in lectures and tutorials. This gives you a strong understanding of the science behind clinical practice however you won't experience hospital/GP placements until the clinical years (typically 3 years). Therefore, some traditional courses may last for a mandatory 6 years instead of the typical 5. Traditional courses give a very good academic foundation and can often lead to careers in academic medicine. Offered by the likes of Oxford and Cambridge¹.
- Problem Based Learning (PBL) – this involves a small group of students being presented with a case study. The group is then tasked with setting their own learning objectives covering all aspects of the case (aided by cues). Then through means such as independent study, lectures/teaching and placements the group gathers their findings and compares notes with a facilitator present. This is a proactive approach tailored towards independent learners and those who like working in groups. Most courses incorporate a certain degree of PBL into their courses however this varies

¹ <https://www.themedicportal.com/application-guide/choosing-a-medical-school/traditional-courses/> - Traditional Course Summary

between universities. PBL requires lots of self-motivation but self-directed learning can be very rewarding².

- Integrated Course – this is similar to a traditional course however it incorporates clinical experience from the beginning of the course. Most universities have adopted this method as the GMC has recommended its approach of learning the material by topic, for example by each system (e.g. cardiovascular system), as opposed to an individual discipline. The advantage of this is that it combines all disciplines together so you can see their relation to one another, combined with clinical experience (seeing patients with related disorders/disease)³.

Each course type has its own advantages/disadvantages depending on your learning style so it is important that you research which universities offer a course best suited to you. **It is vital that you don't just apply to a university based solely on reputation/rankings, in order to succeed you need to be comfortable with the learning style so that you stick with the course throughout its full duration.**

Course Structure

The majority of medical courses last for 5 years however some last for 6. This is either mandatory at certain universities or optional if you wish to intercalate. Intercalation is a research year spent in a topic of your choice, not every medical school offers this however for those that do it can be a good way to break up your studies, to explore an area of interest, to gain research experience or to gain extra points towards your FY1 application after graduation (particularly if you are applying to a competitive hospital). Intercalation leads to you achieving a second degree on top of your medical degree.

On top of this most medical schools allow elective periods at some point during the course where you can study an area of interest either at the university or elsewhere, potentially even abroad.

Certain medical schools still offer full cadaveric dissection (an actual body that you dissect) when teaching anatomy. Some opt for prosection, where the structure is already dissected and you are then taught the anatomy.

When you visit an open day, look into these extra options and Student Selected Components (SSC's) as they will enrich your experience.

² <https://www.themedicportal.com/application-guide/choosing-a-medical-school/pbl-courses/> - PBL Course Summary

³ <https://www.themedicportal.com/application-guide/choosing-a-medical-school/integrated/> - Integrated Course Summary

Personal Statement

Medical schools don't always look at your personal statement and if they do they may not weight it very highly. That being said it is important that you don't neglect your personal statement as they may use it to differentiate between candidates towards the end of the admissions process.

Your personal statement should be an honest reflection of you, your interests, your motivation, your hobbies and most importantly the **impact/insight/experience** that your work experience/volunteering has given you. It is not a requirement nor is it interesting to read about what you have done, they want to know what you gained from it and learned. Be honest, if it changed your perspective of the healthcare system then say that, you don't know all you need to know otherwise you wouldn't be applying to study medicine.

Read into areas of interest and show that you've read and understand the books mentioned. Read journal articles from the BMJ, NEJM, BMA and Nature.

Entry Requirements⁴

In addition to this, the admissions process begins long before you apply to university. Due to the highly competitive nature of offering places, medical schools must rank students holistically. This includes looking at GCSE results and predicted grades achieved at the end of Y12. Whilst each university varies in the weight it places on such requirements it is important to be realistic when applying. From my experience, a lot of universities required a grade 6/7 at GCSE in chemistry and biology (or equivalent) and some universities ranked students using a scoring system, giving points based on grades achieved at GCSE, with more points given for each grade 8/9, then grade 7 and so on. However, this is one individual example so make sure that you research individual medical school's entry requirements. **Some medical schools may be more/less lenient so it pays to do your research.** The medic portal offers a comparison tool to differentiate between UK medical schools:

<https://www.themedicportal.com/application-guide/choosing-a-medical-school/comparisontool/>

As for predicted grades this should ideally be AAA or higher as that is what the majority of offers will be (AAA). Certain universities may offer slightly reduced conditional offers. For example, in 2020, the University of Birmingham offered AAB to students who attended certain schools/lived in certain areas. This in fact incorporated 90% of state schools (please note this isn't necessarily guaranteed) but the condition was Birmingham had to be your firm choice. Furthermore, the University of Sheffield (amongst others) offered AAB to those who achieved an A/A* in an EPQ.

⁴ <https://www.medschools.ac.uk/studying-medicine/applications/entry-requirements?Query=Search...&Type=standard-entry-medicine> - Medical Schools Council Entry Requirement Database

On top of this, medicine is one of the few courses that requires students to sit an entrance exam (the vast majority if not all medical schools). There are 2 possible exams:

- UCAT (University Clinical Aptitude Test) – the UCAT is required by the majority of UK medical schools (but not all). It is a 2-hour computer based exam consisting of 5 sections of multiple choice questions testing Verbal Reasoning (VR), Quantitative Reasoning (QR), Decision Making (DM), Abstract Reasoning (AR) and the Situational Judgement Test (SJT). This will probably be one of the weirdest exams you will ever sit and it is renowned for that, however **with adequate practice and a strong game plan/strategy you can achieve a good score**. Timing is the key issue with the UCAT, answering questions that at times may seem very simple, however the quantity of questions requires you to work at a fast pace. AR is particularly strange so ensure that you revise the key components and their differences whilst practising. Also, the SJT is not scored with the other sections, you are placed into a band 1-4 based on how appropriate your answers are to the situation asked. Band 1 is the highest and 4 the lowest, often medical schools will reject candidates who achieve a band 4. Individual medical schools will set an overall score threshold for applicants to pass for them to be invited to interview. For more information on scoring and the UCAT test visit the UCAT website⁵. Personally I revised using a website called Medify which I would highly recommend as they have thousands of questions and give you real time data to see how you compare against other users, plus areas that you need to work on (however it is a paid service)⁶. The UCAT test is available between July and September and is only valid for entry that academic year. It costs approximately £55 and you get the results on the day.
- BMAT (BioMedical Admissions Test) – required by a handful of UK medical schools. It is a written, 2-hour exam consisting of 3 sections: a generic skills section (multiple choice), a general science/maths test only up to GCSE knowledge (multiple choice) and an essay task. Some argue that the BMAT is a harder test but it is subject to opinion and is a necessary hurdle if you wish to go to a BMAT university. It is sat slightly later in the year (usually September/November) and costs approximately £49. Only valid for entry that academic year. Medify also provides BMAT questions and more information can be found on Cambridge's website⁷.

Each university has a different score threshold, some such as Newcastle University have a higher UCAT threshold whereas others such as Liverpool have a lower threshold in comparison.

Your admission test score will help to determine whether or not you are offered interviews at your chosen medical schools.

⁵ <https://www.ucat.ac.uk> - UCAT Official Website

⁶ <https://www.medify.co.uk> - Medify (offers UCAT and/or BMAT practice)

⁷ <https://www.admissionstesting.org/for-test-takers/bmat/> - BMAT Official Page

Interviews

Interviews may seem daunting but they allow you to make up for any shortcomings in your application or push your application further. By making a good impression, your score may consolidate your offer or give you a competitive edge over other applicants.

There are various different types of interview including:

- Multiple Mini Interviews (MMI) – the majority of UK medical schools use MMI's. These consist of 6-8 stations each with a set task to be completed in 5-7 minutes. If one station doesn't go well it gives you the opportunity to put it behind you without impacting your other stations. The stations will cover a variety of topics such as ethics, insight/work experience/volunteering, motivation to do medicine, hot topics and more.
- Panel Interviews – similar to MMI but in front of a single panel, opportunity to build a rapport, have longer conversations but mistakes may throw you off for the rest of your interview.
- Oxbridge – these interviews are more abstract and may throw you off. However, it is important to think before you speak, maybe even describe your thought process, **evaluating each option**. Take a logical approach and refer back to basic scientific principles that you already know. Often refers to some form of research as Oxbridge aims to produce academic medics so prepare an area of interest that you genuinely like and are interested in.

General tips (maybe less appropriate for Oxbridge) are to research the history/formation of the NHS, practice data interpretation questions, read/learn GMC Good Medical Practice⁸ and understand ethical issues (for example consent, Charlie Gard/Alfie Evans, Dr Bawa Garba)⁹. **YOU MUST LEARN THE 4 PRINCIPLES OF MEDICAL ETHICS AND USE THEM WHERE APPROPRIATE IN YOUR ANSWERS (Justice, Beneficence, Non-maleficence, Autonomy)**¹⁰.

Make sure that you don't learn set answers, you want to come across as honest and genuine and have a discussion rather than just speaking at the interviewer. Take your time and think before you speak, don't say something just for the sake of it as you might contradict yourself. Finally, **don't be phased if the interviewer doesn't seem that receptive/interested, it could be that they're testing you and seeing how it will affect you.**

⁸ <https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/good-medical-practice> - GMC Good Medical Practice

⁹ <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/careers-in-surgery/careers-support/applying-to-medical-school/interview-questions/> - Royal College of Surgeons Interview Questions

¹⁰ <https://www.bmj.com/content/309/6948/184> - Principles of Medical Ethics

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Useful Resources

The Medic Portal - <https://www.themedicportal.com>

General Medical Council - <https://www.gmc-uk.org>

British Medical Association - <https://www.bma.org.uk>

Medical Schools Council - <https://www.medschools.ac.uk>

British Medical Journal - <https://www.bmj.com>

New England Journal of Medicine - <https://www.nejm.org>

Nature - <https://www.nature.com>