

Introduction

Access courses provide a route for learners wishing to study medicine or dentistry who do not have formal qualifications in A-level Biology and Chemistry. They are delivered in FE colleges and are often free or at low fee levels. These routes can help to widen participation in medicine and dentistry by providing an entry route to those with different experiences and backgrounds to those who are eligible for standard entry and graduate entry medical and dental programmes.

To achieve portability and the objective of widening access to medicine and dentistry it is vital that Access courses are aligned with medical and dental school expectations. To this end the Medical Schools Council and Dental Schools Council have agreed the following acceptability criteria for Access to medicine and dentistry courses. These criteria cover entry requirements, course content and required outcomes and standards. Whilst it is accepted that Access courses may vary in their approaches, all courses must provide the information indicated in the below criteria to their prospective students, and to medical and dental schools, so that students and schools alike can make informed decisions.

Appendix 1 of this document outlines a set of FAQs for those considering Access courses which extract relevant details from the criteria below. Medical and dental schools may wish to use this information on their website. Appendix 2 provides a list of Access courses accepted by UK medical schools (accurate as at April 2011).

Acceptability criteria

Entry requirements- *getting the right applicants*

Access courses should provide as much information as possible about who should apply to their programmes. This could be achieved through clear publication of entry requirements in course guides, on websites or on information days.

Age

Access courses should be targeted at mature learners. It should be made clear that these programmes are not suitable for applicants who have very recently failed to meet the desired A-Level or degree results for entry to medicine/dentistry. Ideally, Access course applicants will have had a gap in their formal education, often gaining work experience during this time.

Academic criteria

Medical and dental schools expect students on Access courses to lack the necessary scientific qualifications for standard entry medical/dental programmes. Access courses should be seen as an alternative to A-Levels/level 3 qualifications rather than a supplement to recent poor performance.

However, prior qualifications are still relevant. Many medical/dental schools have GCSE/O-Level requirements, for example minimal attainment requirements in Maths and English. Some medical/dental schools will have more detailed criteria for attainment at GCSE/O-Level and at A-Level and degree (for those who have these qualifications). Applicants should be advised to check that they are eligible to progress to their chosen medical/dental school based on their previous results. Medical/dental schools may also require admissions tests such as BMAT and UKCAT, it is important that applicants are made aware of this.

Demonstration of academic potential is essential due the rigorous demands of a standard medical/dental programme. Interviews or pre-admission tests will assist assessment of academic potential and communication skills as part of the selection process for the Access course.

Non-academic criteria

Medical and dental schools require applicants to demonstrate some understanding of what a career in medicine/dentistry involves and their understanding of, and suitability for, a caring profession. Therefore, it is appropriate for Access courses to request this too. Applicants may draw on relevant work experience or shadowing, either paid or voluntary in health or related areas, to demonstrate this understanding. Practical experience in hospices and residential homes, domestic caring responsibilities or even reflection on experiences of a healthcare setting are equally as appropriate as work in a conventional healthcare setting. More important than the experience itself is the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the relevant skills and attributes the profession requires by reflecting upon and drawing on any experience they may have. Where this experience is limited, Access course applicants should be advised appropriately on the usefulness of gaining further experience before applying to medical/dental school.

Course content- covering the required subjects

Subjects

The core content of acceptable Access courses tends to be biology, chemistry, maths and physics modules. The level of these core modules should be the equivalent of A-Level standard, although the breadth of coverage may not be exactly equivalent. Modules on health issues and other medicine/dentistry specific topics are also desirable. It is important that the content of courses requires significant commitment as this will help to prepare applicants for a standard medicine/dentistry course.

Assessment

Assessment of performance in Access courses should be available for every module and should be based on a variety of methods. Aligning types of assessment for Access courses with those used in medical and dental schools is essential. Therefore a mixture of methods including exams, presentations, group work and written assignments should be provided through Access courses.

It is important that students demonstrate an ability to cope with assessment of their knowledge in synoptic exams with a strict limit on the number of re-sit attempts. Access courses should have a clear policy on acceptable evidence of extenuating circumstances that allow a re-sit.

Required outcomes and standards - *qualifying for medical and dental school*

Level of qualification

Qualifications should be credit based and graded. Usually, 60 credits are required with at least 45 being at level 3, the rest being at level 2, though this may differ. The majority of schools accept Access course applicants who have achieved distinctions in the Level 3 modules. Whilst there is variation in whether this needs to be in all modules or an average grade, it should be made clear that a distinction is generally the expected outcome for those who go on to medical/dental school.

Link to medical/ dental school

It should be made explicit which medical/dental schools accept the Access course, whether there is a guaranteed interview scheme or if there are linked place arrangements (for example, after acceptance by an Access course some medical/dental schools interview applicants and potentially make an early offer subject to satisfactory completion of the Access Course) and ideally details of how many Access course students have gone on to further study and at which institutions.

Training and advice

To fully prepare students who have not been involved in competitive application processes before, Access courses should provide advice and/or coaching on careers, university applications and interview techniques.

Appendix 1: Access course FAQs (delete medical/dental as appropriate)

What is an Access course?

Access courses provide a route for learners wishing to study **medicine/dentistry** who do not have the required formal qualifications for standard entry to **medicine/dentistry**. They are delivered in Further Education colleges and are often free or at low fee levels. These routes can help to widen participation in **medicine/dentistry** by providing an entry route to those with different experiences and backgrounds to those who are eligible for standard entry and graduate entry **medical/dental** programmes.

Access courses are targeted at mature learners and are not suitable for applicants who have very recently failed to meet desired A-Level or degree results for entry to **medicine/dentistry**.

How do **medical/dental** schools consider applicants from Access courses?

Different **medical/dental** schools have different rules about accepting applicants from Access courses and about which Access courses they accept. Before you enrol on an Access course you are advised to consider the following:

- Find out which **medical/dental** schools accept the Access course you are interested in and whether there is a guaranteed interview scheme or linked place arrangements. It may also be worth asking how many Access course students have gone on to further study and at which institutions.
- Prior qualifications are still relevant. Many **medical/dental** schools have GCSE/O-Level requirements, for example minimal attainment requirements in Maths and English. You are advised to check what other qualifications (beyond an Access course) are required by those **medical/dental** schools you may wish to apply to in the future. Some **medical/dental** schools issue written statements of what they require prospective applicants to achieve through an Access course. A full list of medical school websites can be found here: www.medschools.ac.uk/Students/Courses/Pages/All-courses.aspx and a full list of dental school websites can be found here: www.dentalschoolscouncil.ac.uk/uk_dental_schools_list.htm
- **Medical/dental** schools require applicants to demonstrate some understanding of what a career in **medicine/dentistry** involves and their understanding of, and suitability for, a caring profession. Applicants may draw on relevant work experience, either paid or voluntary in health or related areas, to demonstrate this understanding. Access courses are likely to request this of applicants too. This may mean practical experience in hospices and residential homes, domestic caring responsibilities, reflection on experiences of a healthcare setting or work in a conventional healthcare setting such as a hospital or GP surgery. More important than the experience itself, is the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the relevant skills and attributes the profession requires by reflecting upon and drawing on any experience. Where this experience is limited, it may be necessary to conduct further work experience or shadowing prior to application to **medical/dental** school.
- **Medical/dental** schools may also require admissions tests such as BMAT and UKCAT.
- **Medical/dental** schools generally expect 'distinction' grades from Access course applicants and usually require 60 credits, with at least 45 being at level 3, the rest being at level 2, though this may differ.

What are the entry requirements for Access courses?

Entry requirements for Access courses are different to those expected of standard entry to **medical/dental** school. Therefore, it is unlikely that Access courses will have strict post-16 qualification requirements. While

formal qualifications may not always be required, demonstration of academic potential is essential due to the rigorous demands of a standard **medical/dental** programme.

What will I learn on an Access course?

The core content of Access courses tends to be biology, chemistry and physics modules. The level of these core modules should be the equivalent of A-Level standard, although the breadth of coverage may not be exactly the same. Modules on health issues and other **medicine/dentistry** specific topics may also be covered. The content of courses should require significant commitment, as this will help to prepare you for a standard **medicine/dentistry** course.

How will I be assessed?

Assessment on an Access course should as far as possible be designed to reflect the types of assessment you would expect at **medical/dental** school. This may include exams, presentations, group work and written assignments