

# A journey to medicine: **The UCAS application**

March 2017

Start



# A journey to medicine: The UCAS application

## How to use this booklet

This is the third of five booklets developed for teachers and advisers in secondary schools and colleges. This booklet provides a guide to helping your students put together their UCAS application for medicine. The suggestions in this booklet are designed to for consideration by students from age 16 onwards, but would be useful to younger students as well.

This booklet takes you through the considerations that students are encouraged to make when deciding which medical schools to choose. It includes advice and guidance on elements of the application form, such as the personal statement, predicted grades and the academic reference.

This booklet is particularly aimed at those schools and colleges which have limited experience of supporting students in their application to medicine. It has been produced by the Medical Schools Council and is endorsed by all 33 publicly funded undergraduate medical schools in the UK.

The information relates to UK medical schools only. It is correct and accurate at the time of publication (March 2017), and relates to the 2017–2018 admissions process. It will be updated annually but we advise you to check individual medical school websites.



# Contents

Choosing medical schools	3
• Location	
• Intercalated degrees	
• Learning and teaching styles	
Personal statement	5
Predicted grades	6
Academic reference	7
Fifth choice	8



## Choosing medical schools

**Medical schools differ in many ways. It is important for your students to be aware of the differences and to find somewhere that suits them.**

The choice of medical school does not determine the type of foundation placement allocated after graduation, or the further training engaged in afterwards.

The number of medical school places is limited by the Department of Health. This results in significant competition for places. It is therefore important for students to choose a medical school which suits their academic profile, skills and attributes.

Here are some of the main differences.

### Location

The location makes a difference. Your students will be studying at their chosen institution for up to six years, with limited holiday periods, so it is important they are in a location they like. Location can also make a difference to the students' placements. Some medical schools will have placements which require more travel than others.

### Intercalated courses

An intercalated course is an additional one or two years and students can get an additional bachelors or masters level degree. Some medical schools require students to do an intercalated course. Other medical schools provide this as an option and eligibility can often depend on grades. It is usually taken after the first three years of study. All of the subjects on offer will be of value to a future doctor in whatever field they may work in. An important aspect of an intercalated degree is that the medical student will develop an understanding of research methods, and be able to undertake in a research project. Examples include a masters in public health, research methods, biochemistry or health care ethics and law.

### Learning and teaching styles

Importantly, medical schools differ in the way in which they teach medicine. There are several different teaching styles, and medical schools often use a combination of approaches.

The most common method used is to undertake pre-clinical training, which is the study of basic medical sciences for the first two or three years (including bioscience and behavioural/social science). During this time contact with patients and clinical placements will be limited. This is then followed by clinical training during which students will work in hospitals and general practice under the supervision of practising doctors, alongside attending formal teaching sessions. However, there are other courses where there is a mix of clinical placements and formal teaching from the start of the course.

While some medical schools will teach separate scientific disciplines (like anatomy, physiology and pathology), most courses provide some degree of integration. Some are specifically structured as integrated courses, in which material is learnt in the context of body systems (like circulatory or respiratory) and/or integrated into other themes like scientific basis of medicine, for example therapeutics

Many medical schools use more self-directed approaches, such as problem-based learning. Some medical schools may use these types of learning activity more than others. It is important for your students to understand the approach taken. Problem-based learning focuses on learning from clinical cases and is often associated with more frequent patient contact in the early years. Students are given medical cases to explore and learn from, guided by group work with a tutor as well as self-directed learning. Problem-based learning is an 'open inquiry' approach where facilitators play a minimal role

and medical students themselves guide the discussion. It allows students to develop skills for their future practice, including critical appraisal, dealing with uncertainty and group collaboration and communication.

Most medical schools use some small group, self directed learning alongside more traditional approaches (for example, lectures and seminars). Encourage your students to investigate what the relative proportions are.



## Choosing medical schools

There are some other styles of teaching, which medical schools will use in conjunction with others, including:

### Integrated courses

Most medical schools provide some integrated courses. These courses integrate material learned at the pre-clinical and clinical stages, to provide a more seamless approach. Teaching methods can include problem-based learning and practical clinical skills along with technology enhanced learning. Often they are arranged into body systems (like circulatory or respiratory) but they may be integrated into other themes like medicines management.

### Case-based learning

This uses medical cases to stimulate interest in a particular area of the curriculum. Working in small groups over a short period, a case is used to think about the knowledge and skills needed to address the patient case.

### Enquiry-based learning

This starts by posing questions, problems or scenarios. Students will identify and research issues and questions to develop their knowledge. It is generally used in small-scale investigations and projects, as well as research.

### Multi- or inter-professional learning

All medical schools will include some elements of multi- or inter-professional learning. Multi-professional learning methods often involve two or more professions learning the same content side by side. Inter-professional learning focuses on not only the subject matter, but also on the way in which practitioners work together. It may include aspects of developing understanding of and respect for other professions, appreciation of different ways of working, trust and communication skills required for working with other professions, and appreciation of the strengths of a diverse workforce.

“It is vitally important that prospective medical students find out about the different ways in which they will be expected to learn at different medical schools. Some styles of learning work very well for some students, while other students find them quite difficult to adapt to. There are benefits and drawbacks to each type of medicine course: what is important is that students should work out which type best fits their individual strengths and will provide them with the best environment in which to learn and develop.”

Dr Gordon Dent, Director of Admissions and Deputy Director of Medical Science (Education), Keele University School of Medicine



## Personal statement

**Many students get very concerned about what to write in their personal statement. The most important thing is that it is written by them, it reflects the student, and is an honest reflection of their beliefs, skills and interests.**

Medical schools differ in their use of personal statements. Some do not read them at the initial assessment, instead using a combination of predicted grades, admissions tests, and/or the academic reference. Some medical schools screen the statements for any widening participation flags, while some will use the statements during interview. Some medical schools use them as a key part of the admissions process. As your student will be applying to several medical schools it is important that time and care is devoted to the personal statement.

Many medical schools offer advice on how to put together a personal statement. This will be available on their website or during open days. It is a good idea for your students to look at the information available for the different medical schools they are interested in applying to. Medical schools may be looking for different things.

Your students need to ensure that the majority of their personal statement is about their experience, skills and attributes relevant to medicine.

Usually the personal statement starts with the student outlining what attracted them to medicine. Encourage your students to think about what it means to them and to express it in their own words

Ensure your students focus on what they have learned about being a doctor and working in the healthcare profession from their work or voluntary experience. Ask them to focus on the knowledge they have gained about life as a doctor rather than the activity itself. If they have

gained skills, encourage them to explain why those skills are important for a doctor.

Some students will have participated in a higher education outreach programme. If this has supported their understanding of what it will be like to study medicine, or be a doctor, they should refer to it. Medical schools will be interested in the experience wherever it has taken place; it does not have to be with the medical school that the students applies to.

Students may wish to include some information on any areas of medicine which interest them. They can refer to their Extended Project, if relevant, or any medicine- or science-related outreach activities they have attended, or any journal or news article they have read. Encourage your students to write about what they found interesting and why.

Ensure your students include some information about what they like to do in their spare time and how it has developed them. Medical schools want to see how students can contribute to student life more generally and also how students relax away from their studies.

For those students who are considering deferring for a year, ensure they check that the medical school accepts deferred applications. Encourage students who are submitting a deferred application (or who have undertaken a gap year) to include a short paragraph about what their plans are for the year and what they hope to learn. Make sure your student still focuses on their past experiences as the application will be judged on this basis rather than their future intentions.

As for all personal statements make sure your students double-check their punctuation, spelling and grammar. Also, make sure they avoid using clichés.

### For more information

UCAS has good information on how to write a personal statement: [www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/when-apply/writing-personal-statement](http://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/when-apply/writing-personal-statement).

### Student activity

50 minutes

Ask your students to write a list of everything they would want a medical school to know about them – their achievements, talents, experiences and personal qualities.

After they have completed the list ask them to allocate each element in their list to one of the following areas (this will help them structure their personal statement):

- Introduction
- Knowledge and interest in the subject
- Work or voluntary experience
- Hobbies and interests

From this they should be able to start developing a first draft of their personal statement.

## Predicted grades

**Each pending and achieved qualification that the applicant has entered on their application will be listed in the reference section.**

When entering predicted grades consider whether they meet (or exceed) the entrance requirements for the medical courses chosen, or are consistent with the previous academic performance of the student. If they do not, then either speak to the student about whether they need to reconsider the application or provide an explanation in the reference.

Encourage your students to include all the academic qualifications that they have taken or are pending. They should list any A levels (or equivalent) qualifications they have taken early, the Extended Project Qualification (if studying) and all their GCSE or Scottish Nationals. If they have not been included on the UCAS application form, medical schools cannot consider them.

Predicting future grades can be difficult and medical schools know that it is not an exact science. If your predictions are based on internal examinations (for example mocks) then explain this in the reference.



### For more information

UCAS provides information on how to include predicted grades within the application form: [www.ucas.com/advisers/references/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-references](http://www.ucas.com/advisers/references/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-references).

“While recognising that predicting A level grades is not an exact science, it is most helpful for those reviewing UCAS applications if the basis on which the predictions are based can be outlined. Due to the large number of applications received, it is not possible to accept changes to predicted grades after the UCAS deadline, and if predicted grades are omitted, medical schools will usually assume that the applicant’s likely grade will be below that required.”

Professor Mary Jane Platt, Clinical Professor of Medical Education. MB BS Course Director and Admissions Director, Norwich Medical School

## Academic reference

**The academic reference can be extremely important, as it is an informed view from an educational professional who knows the candidate.**

As with personal statements, medical schools will use the academic reference in differing ways. Some will not read them. Some will refer to them during the interview process or in a final consideration. For other medical schools they will be an integral part of the process.

Make sure your students keep you up to date with their work, voluntary experience and extra-curricular activities. Ask them let you know of anything that they could not fit into their personal statement.

The reference should complement the student's personal statement. Highlight and emphasise in the academic reference anything that you think is important to the application.

Medical schools expect an academic reference to provide:

- **An assessment of the student's academic potential.** Subject-by-subject reports are helpful with information provided by the subject teachers. Include an evaluation of the student's performance compared to others. You do not need to repeat any examination results that are included elsewhere on the form. If there are any low grades, then do explain any mitigating circumstances.
- **Confirmation that the student is motivated and committed to studying medicine.** Medical schools want to know that the student can cope with the study demands but also will continue learning throughout their career.
- **Confirmation that the student is suitable for medicine.** Consider both the course and the career, including the personal characteristics needed to succeed in medicine.

- **Any information about the social or educational disadvantage that they have experienced and/or overcome.** Background information on the school as well as the applicant is helpful.
- **Any additional information that the student may not have included.** Is there anything you can add regarding their work or voluntary experience, or key qualities their extra-curricular activities demonstrate?

Wherever possible, include evidence on your statements as this can make your reference more persuasive.

Importantly, be aware of the key qualities needed to be a good doctor, like empathy, integrity, communication, teamwork, leadership, desire to learn and resilience.

If your school does not offer AS levels, include confirmation of this policy within the academic reference. Students will not be disadvantaged in the admissions process.

Remember that you have a limit to the amount of information you can include within the academic reference. Use the space to highlight and emphasise information relevant to the application.

Students are asked to state any disabilities or special requirements in a separate part of the application. Students are not obliged to disclose such information on their application, however, early disclosure gives the medical schools more time to prepare and arrange the support that a student may need. Some referees may wish to mention the student's disability in an academic context, such as how they currently cope at school or college. However, this information can only be provided with the applicant's permission.

Aim for a reference that is objective and analytical, but sprinkled with personal endorsement.

### For more information

UCAS provides information on what you need to do if writing an academic reference: [www.ucas.com/advisers/references/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-references](http://www.ucas.com/advisers/references/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-references).

## Fifth choice

**Students can choose four medicine courses in their UCAS form and should be encouraged to use all four choices for medicine. They are also given a fifth choice to apply for anything except medicine. Universities and medical schools will only see the courses a student applies to at that institution. Admissions staff will not see the applications to other medical schools or universities.**

Many students use the fifth choice as a back-up in case they do not receive any offers to study medicine. The fifth choice will not prejudice your student's application in terms of demonstrating commitment to study medicine. The fifth choice can be at any university. It does not need to be at the same university as their medical school choices.

Many students use the fifth choice for a medicine-related degree. Common choices include biomedical sciences, biochemistry, pharmacy, psychology, chemistry, biology or an allied health profession course. Some course may be useful as a platform for graduate medicine. For these types of courses the personal statement is likely to be relevant. It is, however, worth checking with the course in question if they would prefer a separate personal statement.

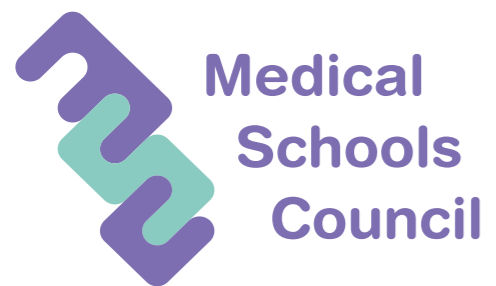
If a student is going for something totally unrelated then it is important to check if a separate personal statement is required. If required, it will be submitted separately, directly to the university.

Encourage your students to consider the fifth choice carefully and chose something they could imagine themselves doing.

“Medicine applicants can choose four medicine courses on their UCAS form and can select a fifth non-medicine course without prejudice. Acceptance of a non-medicine course often provides an applicant who has failed to achieve medicine offers, or to confirm their medicine place, an alternative at confirmation. Many of the degrees that applicants consider can be used to apply to graduate-entry medicine. However applicants should be encouraged to choose a degree that they are genuinely interested in as graduate-entry medicine is itself extremely competitive and the chosen degree may, for a variety of reasons, become the foundation of a non-medical career.”

Dr. Fiona Watson, Director of Admissions,  
School of Medicine Institute of Clinical Sciences,  
University of Liverpool





The Medical Schools Council represents the interests and ambitions of UK medical schools

**[www.medschools.ac.uk](http://www.medschools.ac.uk)**

Written by Nursaw Associates

**[www.nursawassociates.com](http://www.nursawassociates.com)**

Designed by Wax DesignWorks Limited

**[www.waxdesignworks.co.uk](http://www.waxdesignworks.co.uk)**