

An outline of the educational processes leading to medical school admission in the UK

All applications to University in the UK have to be made through a central co-ordinating body, the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS, www.ucas.ac.uk/, accessed Feb 2010). Students complete a standardised application form, which includes personal details and also information on their most recent educational institution and qualifications. Some of this information is provided by the school or college attended.

The majority of students who enter medical school in the UK are teenagers, generally aged 18-19, who have just completed their secondary education and taken formal examinations. These are termed 'school leaver entrants'. A smaller number are older (mature) students who may have completed a University degree in another subject, or have taken a different career path, before choosing medicine. A further group may be admitted under 'widening access' initiatives, described below.

This document provides a brief summary of the educational routes available, and explains relevant terminology.

Schools and colleges

Secondary education is provided by a number of different types of school and college. The data that we have included in this paper are received directly from UCAS, and we have no detailed knowledge of the actual schools included in each group. The main classifications given are:

- **Selective schools:** these may be categorised as Independent, Grant-maintained or Grammar schools, but all share some aspect of selection of the pupils that they admit, and this will normally include some test of academic excellence. They tend to have higher teacher:pupil ratios and have a reputation for academic achievement, so we grouped them together
- **Comprehensive:** these are the largest group of State-funded schools, generally admitting children from the age of 11 until they complete their secondary education at 18-19.
- **Sixth Form College or Centre:** in some areas of the UK, pupils will leave their comprehensive or other school at 15-16 (after GCSEs, see below) and transfer to a Sixth Form College. We have therefore grouped these colleges with comprehensive schools.
- **Further/Higher Education:** This group includes all those offering education to those no longer attending school, ie university degrees and higher vocational qualifications, usually for students over the age of 18.

The UCAS data also includes 'Other' and 'Unknown'.

UK schools have additional descriptors such as 'Faith Schools' (those catering for particular religious groups), or 'City Academies' (newer schools, usually in large urban areas, funded by a combination of State provision and private or corporate sponsorship, and run with some independence from the State sector). These may fall into any of the main groups above. UCAS are currently reviewing their schools classification (personal communication with UCAS official, Sept 2009)

Pre-admission qualifications for school leavers

Individual medical schools operate their own admission systems, which normally include interviews and other means of assessing the candidates' overall suitability for medicine, including some measure of their academic ability.

School-leaver entrants in England normally provide evidence of their passes at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), generally taken at age 15-16 in a wide variety of subjects, and GCE A-level (General Certificate of Education at Advanced level), taken 2-3 years later. Passes at A-level are graded as A-E and the majority of students study 3-4 subjects. Further information is available at <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/index.htm> (accessed Feb 2010).

UCAS has devised a system of 'tariff points' which are applied to standard school-leaving examinations, such that A-levels are scored as A=120 points, B=100, C=80, D=60 and E=40. This system enables a student's post-16 academic achievements to be summed as a single score. The majority of medical schools currently expect their students to have achieved a minimum of AAB at A-level, ie a total score of at least 340 points, often including Biology and/or Chemistry.

Some schools (largely the Independent ones) do not use the A-level but opt for the International Baccalaureate (IB), which is taken in 5-6 subjects and yields a total points score. In 2006 the IB was not tariff-scored by UCAS. Individual medical schools set their own requirement for admission.

UCAS provides medical schools directly with the school examination results of their applicants. This is done via the Awarding Body Linkage, which is a sub-division of the UCAS organisation.

(http://search1.ucas.co.uk/higher/about/CBP_2006-9.doc , accessed Feb 2010)

'Grade inflation'

Over recent years there has been a steady increase in the proportion of school leavers obtaining top grades in most or all of their A-level examinations, leading to difficulties in identifying the highest-achieving students. This has become known as 'grade inflation'. It has been attributed in part to changes in the curriculum and examination structure. These included the introduction of modular courses, which are examined module by module rather than in single examinations at the end of the two year course, and can be re-sat to achieve higher grades; the use of coursework, completed in non-examination conditions; and less use of longer essay-style questions within the examinations.

Some of these changes are now being reversed, together with the introduction of a new A* grade.

(http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/ExamsTestsAndTheCurriculum/DG_10013915, accessed Feb 2010)

Alternative routes for medical school entry

Some students will not be assessed in the same way on their A-level (or equivalent) tariff score. These include:

- Graduate entry students, who have completed a non-medical degree course and will be considered on the basis of their degree. Some will be admitted to

traditional 5-year courses but the majority will enrol at the newer Graduate Entry Medical Schools

- Mature students, who may have completed their secondary education some years back. Their educational achievement at school will be considered but in conjunction with other factors, such as work and study since leaving school.
- Students admitted via 'widening access' initiatives, which aim to increase participation from deprived or other non-conventional backgrounds. (<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/foreword.shtml>, accessed Feb 2010) They may be admitted with a slightly lower tariff score, if still at school, or will have to provide other evidence of ability, such as the completion of a specific pre-admission Foundation course.