

A Guide to Applying to Medical Schools

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Preface

Congratulations! Considering taking up a career in a medicine is one of the most important steps into actually doing it, and in fact, it is where most people stop at, simply for the fear of the complex application procedures and the preparations for them. Therefore, it is important that you do not imagine the application process to be an insurmountable monster so that you can rationally break the process down and tackle each step with finesse. That said, you should also treat it seriously, as you should know that it is definitely not an easy path to take.

I am writing this during the holiday before going to the medical school in the University of Manchester and therefore I will mostly discuss the application to medical schools in the UK. For application to medical schools in other countries, please kindly look for other guides.

I shall give a brief self introduction here so you can have a context of where I applied from and what I did. I am Yezhou. I had 3 years of secondary education in Suzhou, China and I then studied in River Valley High School, Singapore from Year 3 to Year 6 (Secondary 2 to Junior College 2). My subject combination for Junior College for A Levels was Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Economics (PCME). That is, I did not study Biology for the A Levels and in fact I did not study Biology for my Secondary 3 & 4 either. This, however, largely limited the range of medical schools to choose from in the UK (this will be discussed later). I thus applied to Dundee, Aberdeen, Manchester and Sheffield in the UK and received offers from the first three mentioned. With the background information, I will discuss the application process from my own experience.

Overview

Applying to medical schools is a long and complex process and I will give you a timeline followed by a detailed analysis on each step later.

- (1) Start of Junior College 1: Starting Preparation;
- (2) Start of Junior College 2: Made a final decision on the countries you are applying to and the majors you are applying for;
- (3) June in JC 2: Take the UKCAT Examination;
- (4) August: Start your UCAS application and write your personal statement;
- (5) Approx. 15th October: UCAS Application deadline for medical schools (and all majors for Oxbridge);
- (6) Early November: Take the BMAT Examination;
- (7) November to January: Receive invitation to interviews
- (8) January to February: Interview face-to-face in Singapore/ Malaysia/ the UK
- (9) February to March: Receive conditional offers from universities
- (10) June: Deadline to reply to your offers
- (11) Late July: Receive the unconditional offer from the university you accepted once the universities verify that you have met the conditions
- (12) August: Receive your CAS number for Visa Application
- (13) Mid September: Start of UK Medical Schools

In the sections below, I will divide the process into three parts, namely, preparation before the application, making the application, what to do after the application. However, before

that, I will lay down a common set of criteria upon which most medical schools assess you. (You can find specific requirements for the medical schools on their websites).

- (1) Academic Abilities in School: Preliminary exams and UKCAT/ BMAT.
- (2) Academic Abilities outside School: Including various competitions and research
- (3) Non-academic Abilities and Experiences: CCA, community involvements, leadership abilities
- (4) Personality and Soft Skills: Including qualities like compassion, communication skills. These can be seen from item (3) and also during the interview.
- (5) Interests in Medicine: Including the major and the career. This can be seen in item (2) & (3), your personal statement and the interview.

Before the Application

1. Before JC 2/ Year 6

Subject Combination It is compulsory for you to take H2 Chemistry to be considered for medical schools and it is also highly recommended to take H2 Biology. This will therefore mean that you will likely take Chemistry and Biology for Secondary 3 & 4. Otherwise, without H2 Biology, you will only be able to apply to a rather limited range of medical schools. (Including and not limited to Cambridge, Oxford, Bristol, Dundee, Aberdeen, Manchester and Sheffield)

Your Grades in School The UK universities pay most attention to your four “A Level Content-Based Subjects”, i.e. the four H2 subjects instead of General Paper and Project Work. That said, the General Paper, Project Work and H3 Subjects are not useless, because having ‘A’s for your subjects always looks good to the universities and shows that you can manage your time well.

Apart from that, Oxford and Cambridge do take your H3 grades and even General Paper into considerations, due simply to the sheer competition to get into those two universities. Also, as far as I know, the UK universities will only have 2 sets of your grades, those of the Year 4 End-of-Year Examinations and the predicted A Level grades projected from the Preliminary Examinations and Common Tests. However, your performance during other tests may be reflected in the recommendation letter by your form teacher, where there may be questions about your ranking in class/ the cohort.

Here, I shall give a recommended “the grades to aim for in your preliminary exams”, ‘A’ for at least 3 out of 4 “Content-Based H2 Subjects”, from which you may get straight ‘A’s for your predicted grades.

Community Involvements I really can’t emphasize more on this. Especially for medical schools, you will definitely need a strong profile for your non-academic activities outside the school. Some medical schools specifically ask for activities involving caring for others, including the sick/ the elderly/ the needy. However, the medical schools do recognize that it is not always possible to secure an involvement in works at the hospitals (which I did not have either). What medical schools do require is the commitment to a cause and demonstrated compassion to the less privileged. Therefore, quality is more important than quantity, i.e. I rather do one 2-year community project caring for the elderly than doing 7 different ones, each for a month or two. Just consider this from the perspective of an admission officer, who will pick a few from hundreds of overseas applicants (usually 10-20 from a pool of 300+ international applicants, giving an admission rate of ~5%), every student will be able to talk about the many reasons why one should care for the less privileged, but what can make you stand out is a convincing

account of you taking real tangible actions involving in a long-term project in empowering the sick, for example. They will not have time for you to talk about your 7 different projects and talking about one 1-month project does not make your stand out from the crowd.

Also, merely being involved in a project for a long time is not enough. It has to be a meaningful project where you had a strong and convincing motive to involve yourself in. Practically speaking, you will write about this one meaningful and hopefully less cliché project in your personal statement, discussing what you have learnt from it, how you feel for and know more about the people you were caring for. Thus, if you are still in JC1, you should consider what will be the one or at most two projects you will keep deeply involved in and drop the rest.

Academic Activities outside the School Taking up a major and a career in medicine definitely places heavy requirements on your academic abilities and it takes life-long learning to stay relevant in the field. Therefore, the medical schools want to see that you can deal with your subjects in schools well and still have time for other academic activities to challenge yourself and pursue your academic interests. Before JC2, it is thus important for you to take part in more competitions, olympiads, camps and research projects. These will not only enrich your portfolio, but also sharpen your academic and research skills, which will give you the necessary skills and help you tremendously during your university studies. Moreover, participating in more Chemistry- and Biology-oriented activities will also help you decide whether you will be genuinely interested in taking up a career in medicine and healthcare.

However, it should be again cautioned that quality matters more. Though the process of participating in these activities is indeed valuable, the results are equally important. The results here include only the medals you won, but also what you learn from the experience and how you can tell a story in your personal statement and interviews. Therefore, do take part in a few activities you are genuinely interested in and motivated to do well for, instead of going for many but excelling in none. Furthermore, sometimes, the school might not actively provide you with such opportunities, and the responsibility is yours to ask your teachers and seniors or even search the internet for them.

2. Preparation During JC2

Time Management You really have limited time during JC2 and it is the time for you to focus primarily on your grades. If you have already done a lot of community projects and had decent results for other academic activities outside the school, you should really start to focus on your studies and make sure your grades look good. Of course, if you really enjoy doing them or you seriously lack materials for your personal statement, you could still get some involvements before June. (Bearing in mind that it is an essential quality of a good leader to pass down the responsibilities and knowledge to his juniors to ensure the continuity of any projects) However, considering the prime importance of your preliminary exams, you should make sure these activities will not jeopardize your grades.

Choosing the Country Although the main purpose of this article is to discuss UK medical schools, I do believe many of the readers are not firmly set on applying solely to UK medical schools and I should briefly review your alternative options. Firstly, NUS and NTU, you should definitely apply for the two for they are less expensive, more locally relevant, and it is closer to home. Next, I do recommend applying to Australia or even New Zealand, Hong Kong as a backup if you are firmly set on getting a degree in clinical medicine. Lastly, I would not recommend US because you have to take a non-medicine first degree before taking a master equivalent degree in medicine, making it an 8-year course at least before you can start practicing as a doctor. Canada as a country takes less than 10 overseas medical students.

Choosing Medicine Although I assume you are considering medicine, I believe you should still think twice before you are really set on applying for it. There are a few factors you may want to consider. Firstly, majoring in medicine will largely mean choosing to be a doctor for a lifetime. Do consider if you are ready to make that important decision. Secondly, practicing as a doctor will mean a huge sacrifice on your personal and family life. The first 15 years after you enter medical schools will be extremely busy and taxing mentally and physically. You will be working from very early in the morning to late at night and probably called back at midnight. As a junior doctor, you may not have much time for your family or to have a family at all; Next, it is about the interest and your motives in becoming a doctor. If you choose to be a doctor for the money in the “business”, it is very inappropriate, as you may not act in the best interests of your patients but to simply gain personal benefits from them. Also, if only for the money, you might be better off doing finance or other lines of work. Therefore, you should only be choosing medicine if you are interested in the science of medicine and committed to the care of patients; Lastly, the practical considerations will be if you have the money for 5-year degree in the UK, which on average costs slightly lower than S\$10k each year including tuition and living expenses. On the other hand, there are definitely much case for choosing medicine, and I believe you should have your own answer to that.

In order to help you understand the life as a doctor better, I do recommend shadowing a doctor at a hospital or a GP clinic. One way will be to participate in a 3-day program called NUH Job Shadowing Program (JSP), where you will be assigned to follow a doctor, usually a registrar, and observe what he does on a daily routine, including ward rounds, clinics and meetings. Believe me, this gives you much more insights than merely reading about it. Also, some universities do expect you to participate in one of such activities once so that they can be sure that you understand what the profession requires and what realistically you do as a doctor. During this rare opportunity, you should take notes on what happened and the interesting medical cases you saw. You should also ask the doctor about things you do not understand and also research online independently, because you might even be asked about these in the interview.

Making the Application

1. Overview

In this section, I will cover details of the application process itself, including school choices, UCAS application, personal statement, UKCAT & BMAT, letter of recommendation and other additional materials. You should make sure all parts of the application are done carefully to capture the best aspects of you and do justice to the preparations you have done before that. I do recommend reading this section even if you are not yet in JC2 so that you have a rough idea of what you will be submitting so you can be more better prepared when the time comes.

2. Choosing the medical school

Since I have already discussed the medical schools in other countries, I shall now briefly list a few factors you should consider in choosing among the UK medical schools, which are the following:

- (1) Subject Combination: If you did not take Biology, you can only choose from a shortened list of schools mentioned above. (The list changes every year and you should check again to confirm)

- (2) Career Plan: If you are planning to come back to Singapore to practice, you should look up the list of registrable basic medical qualification on the Ministry of Health website. On this matter, Singapore's doctors earn much more than the British doctors, while there is less competition in UK to get into some popular specializations and to get promoted.
- (3) Course Structure: Some universities like Oxbridge have very few clinical sessions during the first two years while you will go to the hospitals almost every week for other schools. Some schools go by systems bundling both normal and abnormal structures while others go through the normal structures of all systems before touching on the abnormalities. Some schools promote self-directed learning while others adopt a more traditional approach. You should look up the school's websites for these differences.
- (4) Tuition Fee: It might come at a surprise to you how contrastingly different the tuition fees differ among the schools. Moreover, Scottish government levies a tax of £10k on medical students.
- (5) Enrollment statistics: This includes the cohort size (80~400) which will determine whether you will have a diverse pool of students or an intimate group, and the admission rate where some schools are much tougher to get into, e.g. Oxford Medical School has an international admission rate of 2.5%.
- (6) The City: Some people prefer a city life in London while others prefer a idyllic countryside life.

Some readers may realize that the medical school ranking is not in the list. This is because firstly, you will look at it without me mentioning it, and also, "every school is a good school" genuinely applies here. Just as a joke goes, "what's the worst student in the worst medical school called? Answer: Doctor". That is to say, you are being trained to be adequately competent for a profession, and the UK government ensures each medical school has an excellent curriculum to prepare their students for that, since having poorly trained doctors in hospitals will be literally "lethal" for their patients. Therefore, once you choose to major in medicine, ranking will not be as important as it is for other majors and other factors like course structures and enrollment statistics will be more relevant to your considerations. Moreover, if you were to examine the trends in rankings by different ranking agencies for different years, they fluctuates a lot, which really indicates that all medical schools are really similarly good, while some are merely more reputable and thus harder to get in than others. That said, it should be noted that UK medical schools per se are all rather hard to get in (as hard as getting into Oxbridge for other majors), that is to say, you should not put all four of your UCAS choices in the most reputable medical schools but spread your chances to be safe.

3. Medical Aptitude Tests

There are two types of tests, namely the UKCAT and the BMAT, which are required for different universities. UKCAT is used by most of medical schools while BMAT is used by a few others, notably Oxbridge, Imperial College and NTU (NUS does not require either tests). For requirements of specific universities, please look up their official websites. Generally, you do not need too much preparations for either test, as they are mostly tests of your reasoning and reading skills. However, it is still recommended that you familiarize yourself with the format of each section and focus on some specific sections of the tests where your performance can be improved with some practice.

UKCAT This test is held from June to early October every year and you can make an appointment to take the test on any weekdays during the period. However, you can only take

the test once every year and the test results are only valid for that year. The test includes five sections, namely verbal reasoning (reading comprehension), quantitative reasoning (math), decision making (logic questions), abstract reasoning (abstract logic questions like those in IQ tests) and situational judgement (questions asking how you will tackle various real-life scenarios and dilemmas). To prepare for the test, I personally used a website medify.com which provides a paid service of UKCAT preparation with simulated questions. Additionally, there are a few official mock practice papers available on the UKCAT official website, which you should definitely attempt as well.

BMAT The test is held only on a specific date in early November (a few days before your A Level GP paper) and the results are only valid for that specific year. The test includes Aptitude and Skills (logic questions and reading comprehension), Scientific Knowledge and Applications (Content based questions covering 'O' Level Physics, Maths, Chemistry and Biology) and Writing Task (30-minute writing on a topic about scientific ethics with 4 prompts to choose from).

4. The UCAS Application Portal and Personal Statement

UCAS Application Form Every year, UCAS application portal will open in June and the form asks for your basic personal details, family details, choice of universities and majors, school grades and personal statement. It should be noted that there is not a particular section asking for a list of your activities, awards and honors, i.e. you have to include some of these selectively in your 4000-character personal statement. Also, you will not be asked for a recommendation letter. Instead, your form teacher/ civic tutor will be notified by the system to write a recommendation for you, although you should also communicate with your form teacher to discuss what you have already written in your personal statement to avoid repetition. Moreover, in the school grades section, you will be asked to report only your 'O' Level / IP Year 4 grades, Project Work, UKCAT grades, with optionally your SAT, AP, TOEFL, IELTS grades.

Personal Statement UCAS personal statement is contrastingly different from the one required by the US CommonApp Application system (If you are applying to the US simultaneously), where the CommonApp one is more of a discursive narration, while the UCAS one systematic description. For UCAS personal statement, other than introduction and ending, all other paragraphs will share a common structure: the opening sentence summarizes the paragraph; next sentence gives an very brief description of what you did in an event/ competition or for a personal pursuit; the remaining few sentences discusses what you learnt from and how you felt about what you did; the last sentence optionally reiterates the main point or links the contents to university life.

The introduction to the personal statement will be discussing your interest to medicine and brief personal background while the ending will be to briefly conclude and give reasons why you want to study in the UK. It should be noted that the structure suggested here is what my higher education counsellor suggested and what I adopted, and therefore it should a safe and common one. Moreover, you are warned against using a novel essay structure for the personal statement should be an accurate and concise account of your past experiences and personalities, instead of a show of your creativity and writing skills.

There are a few things you should always bear in mind when writing the personal statement. Firstly, the admission readers for your personal statement are the professors in the respective fields you are applying for and therefore they have seen hundreds of medical admission essays every year. Therefore, it is important to make an interesting, distinct and specific point about yourself in each paragraph instead of ramble on and on about a generic point most other candidates will probably have. Usually, your points should cover a few (4~6)

aspects of you, including academic and non-academic abilities, interests in science and medicine, understanding of your course and career. Among the paragraphs, 70%~80% should be academic and course-related while only 20%~30% should be on your CCA, leadership experiences etc.

Secondly, “personal statement” should be personal, i.e. you should be writing about yourself instead of anyone else. For example, instead of “my team did...”, you should write, specifically, “I did...”; instead of “my teacher told me...”, you should write, “I learnt...”. Also, writing about what you did is not as interesting as how you feel and what you thought and learnt, as most candidates should have done similar things but each feels differently.

Next, every sentence in your personal statement should belong to you. That is, firstly, plagiarism is definitely not allowed, and also you have to always ask yourself, “can another random John Doe or Tan Ah Kao write the same thing?” If the answer is yes, you should reconsider what you wrote for the paragraph. This is because, given the 4000-character limit, you will not stand out from many other applicant by writing a mundane and cliché point. Instead, you should write a more unique point that characterizes you. You may say, “oh, I’m just a normal uninteresting person”, then why would any medical school admit you?

Lastly, you should be proactive in looking for your teachers and friends to help you read your personal statement. Not only do you have to make it grammatically perfect, you have to paint a vivid image of yourself through the personal statement from which your teachers and friends will instantly recognize it’s uniquely you.

Apart from that, you can find more advice on this matter from an article entitled “Anatomy of a Personal Statement” on the Oxford University’s website.

5. Letter of Recommendation and Additional Materials

As already mentioned, your letter of recommendation will be written by your form teacher, mainly about your performances in and outside classes. Therefore, to be practical, you have to get on well with your form teacher and make sure he knows you well. Normally, you will want to talk to your form teacher about writing a recommendation letter for you at least 1 month earlier than the deadline. When you talk to him, you should bring him a few pages of materials in the form of a resumé, including a list of the activities you have been involved in and a brief one-line description for each activity. It may be good if you talk about the difficulty of applying to medical school so that your teacher might put in more efforts into your letter and make the things he writes more relevant to the course of medicine.

Other additional materials may include an early application form required by Cambridge by early September, non-academic information forms and etc. The applicants should read through the official university website detailing the application process to the course, as early as possible.

After Application

1. Preparation for the Interview

The only major thing left after the application is the interview, which you will be notified about anytime between November and January next year. The actual interview will be taking place anytime from January and February, in Singapore/ Malaysia/ the UK. (Most will have at least one interview centre in Singapore or Malaysia.) Therefore, you should check your email often to check for invitation letters for interviews and confirm the dates of interview early with

your universities. This is also to ensure you have adequate time to make appropriate arrangements, if you have to travel to the UK for the interview. Moreover, it should be noted that Medicine is special in this regard, as all applicants to medicine has to be interviewed face-to-face, while a Skype interview will usually suffice for other subjects. Therefore, if you cannot make it for the specific date of interview in Singapore, you have to contact the medical school to request for an alternative day of interview or to travel to the UK for the interview.

The actual interview can be in two formats, the traditional panel interview or a special format created originally only for medical schools called the Multiple Mini-Interview (MMI). In the traditional panel interview, you will be asked questions by a few professors or clinicians, lasting for about 30 minutes to an hour. In the MMI, however, you will be asked to walk around 5~10 interview stations with different professors or clinicians, each lasting about 7~10 minutes with a 2-minute break in between stations. There are many types of interview question, including:

- (1) Personal Statement Question: directly asking for details of events mentioned in the personal statement, including asking for what you have learnt, what you could have done better, or how has the experience influenced your decision to go into the field of medicine.
- (2) Personal Experience Question: asking for academic or non-academic experiences or activities you have participated in. This includes describing the event and reflecting on the event. They may also ask you for an experience that you wished you could include in the personal statement but unable to, due to word limit. They may also ask you for a time when you made a difference to someone else's life.
- (3) Personal Life Question: you will reflect on your personal qualities, strengths and weaknesses. This may include how you deal with stress and expectations and what you usually do to relax.
- (4) Understanding of Medicine Question: asking about your understanding of medicine as both a 5-year course and a life-long profession. Questions may include asking how much you know about the course of medicine and the career as a doctor, the qualities of a good doctor, the stress you will face as a medical student or a practicing doctor.
- (5) Motivation Question: asking your understanding of the responsibilities of doctors and daily lives as a medical student and a doctor. This is to ensure you have the right motives to go into medicine. Please do not provide exceptionally novel answers for such questions, unless you are sure you are taking the right risk.
- (6) Interests in School Question: asking how much you know about the school and the city where the school is located. This might include knowledge about the course details, university lives and the city. It can go very detailed and in-depth, so you should carefully read through the course structure and read about the city.
- (7) Logical Reasoning Question: asking questions about logical and moral dilemmas, likely in the clinical context. You will be tasked to give the cases for both sides of the arguments and then optionally take a stand. An example will be "whether the patient has the right to know the complete truth about his medical conditions".
- (8) Situational Judgment Question (Only for MMI): you will have two minutes to read a short text about a scenario (may not be clinical) and your assigned role and task in the scenario. After two minutes, you will take the role and interact with an actor to complete your assigned task. The task could be "apologize to a patient for forgetting to perform a blood test", "confront your colleague who you saw stealing stationeries from the common office", "as a student councilor, interrogate a student who was

involved in a bar fight last night”. In a traditional panel interview, you could simply be asked to explain what you would do in such scenarios.

- (9) Individual Task Station (Only for MMI): you will be asked to perform a task with a simulated student, such as “solving a maze blindfolded”
- (10) Group Task Station (Only for MMI): you will be asked to perform a task with several other applicants and simulated students, such as “making a straw tower”. You may be asked to reflect on the group’s and your performance after the task.
- (11) Others: some schools may include other types of tasks such as critiquing a filmed clinical session or a timed writing task.

Above are the possible interview questions which you can prepare specifically for. Apart from that, you should also think of specific examples of your past experience which you can use as evidence to substantiate your answers to interview questions. Particularly, you should prepare examples of a personal success, a failure, a feat you are proud of, a time of hardship, a challenge you have overcome, a leadership experience and etc. You should also try to read as much as you can about medicine, the British medical system and the school you are applying for.

Also, some universities may require you to produce some specific documents and certificates during the interview, which may involve official school stamps and signatures. Therefore, you should read through the interview-day instructions carefully in advance.

Final Thoughts

I hope this guide could help you in your application to UK medical schools. If you find an error or an area of improvement, please kindly contact me.

The article consists purely of personal opinions and does not represent the view of any universities. All possible efforts are taken to ensure the accuracy of statistics and facts quoted. The author does not take any responsibility for any error in the writing.

Good luck for your application!

“救人一命，与帮未来的医学生一把，皆胜造七级浮屠”