

2020 Leaver Amy Johnson tells us about her experience of applying to Medicine and time at Brighton and Sussex Medical School. Amy provides a detailed account of the medical tests and the interview process. A must read for anyone considering Medicine!

Applying to Medicine 2020

I only recently left RMGS in 2020 and am now studying my first year of medicine at Brighton and Sussex Medical School. I did 3 A-levels in Biology, Chemistry and Maths as well as the extra qualification of the EPQ. I achieved 3 A's in my subjects which were the minimum grades to meet my offer, and I was able to start medicine in September 2020. Medicine has been an interest of mine for some time, there wasn't a particular event that changed my life and made me want to pursue it, it has just always been a passion for me. The 3 subjects I chose to study are definitely the typical subjects that most candidates take in order to pursue medicine. Biology and Chemistry are essential however, universities have started to take students with a different 3rd subject, some examples I am aware of are English, Geography and Computer Science. From my experience I would recommend choosing something you enjoy, and you don't mind spending extra time on in order to achieve the higher grades. During Year 12 I very much struggled with Maths and found I had to attend extra sessions in order to see improvements in my results, which required a lot of motivation. Eventually I started to see improvements in my grades and was therefore able to get into medical school.

Application process

Applying to medicine is a relatively long process, and therefore it is important to make sure you really do want to study this course. Before applying to UCAS I found it useful to gain some experience in a clinical setting to see what the role of a doctor entails and whether it is was the right choice for me. I was fortunate enough to get some work experience at my local hospital for 2 weeks and also volunteered at a care home for a period of 9 months. The experiences I gained from these opportunities not only helped inform my decision about studying medicine but were useful additions to my personal statement for UCAS and talking points in my interviews. If you are able to get some experience, I would highly recommend keeping a diary of the days and events that stood out to you. Believe me when I say this makes preparing for interviews a lot easier as you have all the details of a particular event that made you reflect on the actions of those involved, and it's much easier to portray to an interviewer the characteristics you saw or demonstrated in the situation.

The next step in applying to medicine was looking at which universities I was interested in studying at. An important aspect of this was which entrance tests were required for each university. There are 2 types of entrance tests for medicine, the UCAT and the BMAT. Most universities have opted to use the UCAT as their entrance test however some, including Oxford, Cambridge and Brighton and Sussex prefer to use the BMAT. If you choose between

a mixture of UCAT and BMAT universities, you unfortunately have to do both exams like me. In my experience, the overall score from the entrance tests heavily influenced if you were given an interview offer however some universities look at lots of other criteria, so it is important that if you struggle with the exams you look into universities that don't rely as much on the tests. Over time you'll learn more about the UCAT and BMAT, but I'll give a quick overview of the 2 exams, so you have an idea of what to expect.

UCAT

The UCAT exam is a time-pressured exam to be completed in a 2-hour period at a local test centre. The dates of the exam vary but typically it runs from early summer through until October. I would recommend doing it during the summer before Year 13 so it is out of the way and you don't have to think about it anymore. The test is comprised of 5 sections each with their individual time restraints as follows:

Verbal reasoning – 44 questions – 21 minutes
Decision making – 29 questions – 31 minutes
Quantitative reasoning – 36 questions – 24 minutes
Abstract reasoning – 55 questions – 13 minutes
Situational judgement – 69 questions – 26 minutes
There is also one minute of instructions before each section starts.

It is useful to become familiar with the different sections of the UCAT early on and identify which sections you struggle with the most. Like I said the exam is extremely time-pressured and therefore it is also important to take practice tests in timed conditions in order to see if you need to work on time management. In preparing for the UCAT I used the 'Get into Medical School' UKCAT question book (the UCAT used to be called UKCAT – it's the exact same exam just without the K) as well as Medic Portal and Medify subscriptions. I found Medify to be particularly useful for the UCAT and would highly recommend purchasing a subscription once you've booked your exam.

BMAT

The BMAT exam is also a time-pressured exam to be completed in a 2-hour period. I personally took the BMAT at the end of the October half-term break at RMGS along with those applying to Oxbridge courses. The BMAT is composed of 3 sections as follows:

Section 1 - skills in problem-solving, understanding arguments, and data analysis and inference – 32 questions – 60 minutes

Section 2 - scientific knowledge typically covered in school science and mathematics – 27 questions – 30 minutes

Section 3 – written essay – 30 minutes

Once again, I would highly recommend Medify for BMAT preparation. This website has lots of practice questions as well as all the content you need to revise for section 2. It is important to note that in section 3 you are only given one sheet of paper, you cannot go over this so ensure the point you make is detailed enough yet concise at the same time.

Interviews

Once I had done these exams and submitted my UCAS application it was time for the interviews. There are 2 types of interviews, MMI and traditional. Most universities use MMI's – which stand for multiple mini-interviews. Essentially this is just speed dating but for medicine. There are typically 5-6 stations where you spend a certain amount of time (typically 5-10 minutes) talking to an interviewer before moving onto the next station until you have completed all the questions. There are certainly benefits to this style of interview as it means each station is a new start, a new interviewer and a new opportunity. I would recommend looking at a broad range of interview questions for MMI's as each station will ask something different and be prepared for some odd tasks – let's just say one of my interview stations involved Lego.

Traditional interviews are slightly different in that you are sat at a table with a couple of interviewers for the full duration of the interview. Admittedly I didn't have any traditional interviews and so I can't really tell you what to expect. With traditional interviews there is less time pressure and therefore you can go into more detail with your answers but be careful with what you talk about – there is nothing worse than talking about cancer when the interviewer is a consultant oncologist and decides to test your knowledge to the extreme. Of course, the interviewer is not expecting you to know everything and it is perfectly fine to admit that, however if this is the case, they are looking for you to use existing knowledge to work out the answer and come to a conclusion, just saying "I don't know" is not a good idea.

For both types of interview what's important is to be relaxed - easier said than done I know. The interviewer is not trying to trick you, they just want to see that you have the characteristics to be a good doctor. In order to come across as comfortable in the interview I would practice answering questions out loud. I used friends and family to practice answering questions, they don't have to be a trained interviewer to tell you whether you are speaking too fast, or not getting to the point, and the more you practice the more relaxed you will come across as on the day.

University

After I received my offers post-interview and got the required grades it was time for me to move into university. I am still yet to experience a normal university life where lectures are in person and we don't have to sit 2 metres apart in our tutorial groups. So far, most of my lectures have been pre-recorded which has both advantages and disadvantages. A typical week for me currently involves:

Monday: 2/3 pre-recorded lectures and either a live symposium (3-hour lecture) or a quiz with a live feedback session

Tuesday: Clinical day – online seminar in the morning then afternoon teaching involving different workshops each week eg history taking, clinical skills, GP placement (which now consists of us watching unseen footage of GPs behind closed doors due to restrictions)

Wednesday: 2/3 pre-recorded lectures and online student selected topic – I am doing paediatric congenital heart diseases

Thursday: 2/3 pre-recorded lectures and online dissection and discussion

Friday: 2/3 pre-recorded lectures and sometimes 1/2 live lectures

Due to the growing concerns over the pandemic, we have also been recruited to work 13.5 hour shifts at the local hospitals in intensive care units where they are caring for Covid patients. This is a very exciting opportunity where we can gain some clinical experience as well as help out the staff in the wards where they are struggling to cope with the pressures of Coronavirus. On these shifts I mostly help with personal care of patients with Covid, help with small procedures such as taking arterial blood gases, and just sitting with patients whether they are ventilated or not. We only do one shift a week since they are so long and the university does not want us to get behind in our studies and therefore I would typically have a shift over the weekend or do a night-shift near the end of the week if I am available.

Meeting people has been more difficult due to the restrictions of the pandemic however, I have still managed to make friends both within and outside my flat. By the time you go to university when hopefully most of the restrictions will have been lifted, it will be even easier for you to interact and connect with people on your course.

Going into medicine is a big decision that requires lots of commitment and dedication. During the application process I remember feeling overwhelmed and anxious at the prospect of doing so much just to get to university, however now that I am here, I can honestly say it is all worth it. The advice I would give when applying to a course like medicine is take the application one step at a time. Ensure you are planning well into the future so that you get everything done but try and focus on only one or two things at a time in order to make it more manageable and before you know it, you will have completed everything.