

Cover story

How to become a doctor

What should candidates know when applying to study medicine? StarEducate speaks to several academics and medical professionals to find out

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TOP students failing to get into medical courses in public varsities, is a perennial issue.

Whether it's the absence of meritocracy or the lack of seats, the finger pointing continues and students are left clueless as to why they were rejected.

Besides academic results, public universities conduct multiple mini-interviews (MMI) where skills and character such as resilience and critical thinking, are assessed.

That's where it gets tricky. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) deputy dean of academics and alumni, Assoc Prof Dr Kamarul Aryffin Baharuddin says it's imperative for students to do their homework before the interview.

"Despite excellent exam results and superb recommendations from former lecturers, some candidates didn't receive an offer for medicine because of their poor performance

during the interview. Being book smart alone is not enough."

Students can get all sorts of information online with a quick click. So, saying "I don't know" at an interview, isn't an option. Studying medicine involves plenty of sacrifice from students, he says.

"It isn't about making money, neither is it about the glamorous life. To better prepare themselves, candidates can browse through the hundreds of YouTube videos on interview tips.

They must also know how to market themselves in a competitive setting," he explains.

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences dean Prof Dr Zamberi Sekawi urged students to start developing key skills and attributes while they're in secondary school.

Scrambling to do it just before the interview, he says, is too late.

"This is a long term process that cannot be developed overnight.

"Communication skills is vital especially because you are



Social skills is another important aspect panels look for during the MMI, says Prof Adeeba.

expected to speak to your patients. The current generation lacks this."

It's frustrating for Prof Zamberi to watch bright students receiving offers to pursue courses listed in the bottom half of their choices.

He says this happens because of the common misconception that a



Being persistent in academics is equally fundamental in pursuing a medical career, says Prof Zaleha.

candidate with good results will automatically get a seat in a public university's medical faculty.

Sharing an example of how a candidate with a perfect CGPA score of 4.0 wasn't offered a seat in the four universities that interviewed him - including UPM -



Pampered students become failed housemen, says Prof Tharmaseelan.

Prof Zamberi says it was because he didn't do well during the interview. His responses left a lot to be desired in almost all areas quizzed.

Echoing his sentiments is Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Faculty of Medicine dean

Prof Dr Zaleha Abdullah Mahdy. Excellent students, she shares, have gotten expelled after being admitted into the varsity's medical faculty.

"It is largely due to their inability to maintain consistency, commitment and focus in their studies, after having worked very hard to achieve highly to enter the programme.

"Some are socially immature and unable to adjust to interpersonal relationships in a residential environment," she adds.

Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Melaka-Manipal Medical College, says only the country's very best would be considered for entry into public varsities.

Prof Tharmaseelan was a past president of the MMA and the Medico-Legal Society of Malaysia; and the former vice-chancellor CEO of a private university.

Those with full straight As may not even be accepted as they're ranked according to marks, and Malaysia produces hundreds of such students - more than what public varsities can accommodate, he points out.

"Many candidates feel that a seat was denied to them as candidates 'less qualified' are granted admission. It's frustrating and it

they become disillusioned with the



The ability to give reasonable and justifiable answers during MMIs is important, says Prof Zamberi.

authorities."

To promote greater transparency, Prof Tharmaseelan suggests a uniform entrance examination.

"A written test and an interview, with marks obtained tabulated and published for everyone to scrutinise, may result in a fairer, and more acceptable method of admission into public varsities."

He says there needs to be greater coordination between the education and health ministries so that academic and training expectations are in sync.

Those who fail to get a place can consider the many private medical schools in the country. He,



Students who respond halfheartedly during MMIs, example "boleh la" are rejected, says Prof Kamarul.

however, advises students looking at private alternatives, to not just think about tuition fees.

"Look at the curriculum, faculty, facilities, and capabilities of their graduates who are working in hospitals as house officers, and medical officers. Ask what is the percentage of their graduates who have become specialists.

"It's perplexing to note that 20% to 25% of doctors drop out during their houseman training.

"One of the factors could be the lack of proper training during their formative years in medical college. So choosing the right college is important."

Those wishing to go abroad, must first determine whether the school is recognised under the Second Schedule of the Medical Act 1971, says Prof Tharmaseelan.

"Just Google 'list of medical schools under Second Schedule'. If the school is not listed, the candidate may have problems later on such as having to sit for the medical qualifying examination (MQE). He or she may not even be a competent house officer after having cleared the MQE if the school is not reputable," he says, adding that clearance from the Education Ministry must be sought before enrolling in any college despite the student having the required grades.

As private tuition fees for Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) programmes are high, he stresses on the importance of thorough research into the medical school.

"You must make sure that the school is able to produce not just a competent graduate, but one who's capable and motivated enough to continue to specialise.

"It's not just the academic facilities that need looking into, a well-stocked library, sports, recreational and other extracurricular activities that promote a healthy and holistic environment are important in creating a well-rounded doctor."

Desperate to be doctors

Aug 2018

- > Many outstanding students, including those who scored a CGPA of 4.0, aren't guaranteed a place to study medicine at public universities.
- Deputy Education Minister Teo Nie Ching said this was because the 11 public universities offering medicine in the country could only accommodate 484 students for medical studies.
- She said the ministry's statistics showed there were 2,730 applicants this year, with 2,490 meeting the minimum requirement. Only two out of 10 applicants will be accepted. Each public university has the autonomy to offer their programmes and set specific tests for each programme as an entry requirement.

May 2016

- > Unqualified students were guaranteed places for plum courses including medicine in universities abroad - via agents. The enrolment package, including foundation course certificates, cost them tens of thousands of ringgit.

March 2016

- > The police and Higher Education Ministry investigated a scam in which students used faked SPM results to gain admission into Egyptian universities. At least 61 students who allegedly forged or altered their 2010 to 2012 SPM results to qualify for their tertiary studies in Egypt were found. Many of these students were still in the country pursuing mostly degrees in medicine and Islamic studies.
- > Sunday Star front page complaints that unscrupulous agents were falsifying SPM result certificates and 'No Objection Certificate' (NOC). Students wanting to pursue medical courses overseas must get NOCs from the ministry. The issuance of the certificates is based on the students having the same minimal entry qualifications as stipulated for entry to local universities.

May 2004

- > As many as 128 students with top grades for their STPM and matriculation examinations failed to get into medicine in public universities because of the stiff competition and the limited number of places available. They were later offered places in public universities for the pre-clinical phase of their programme, and transferred to either a public or private university for the clinical phase.



What you need to know

UM Faculty of Medicine dean Prof Datuk Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman, USM deputy dean of academics and alumni, Assoc Prof Dr Kamarul Aryffin Baharuddin, UPM Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences dean Prof Dr Zamberi Sekawi and UKM Faculty of Medicine dean Prof Dr Zaleha Abdullah Mahdy shed some light on the prerequisites to enter medical courses in their universities.

Application procedure for medicine	Questions asked to selected applicants during the interview/ criteria panel looks for in candidates	Main attributes students should have	Estimated tuition cost	Academic requirements	Application process duration
UM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Fulfill the entrance criteria, as listed in the academic requirements. > Register and sit for the Biomedical Admission Test, or BMAT (UMalaya), entrance examination - an aptitude test that examines scientific knowledge and aptitude for medicine by assessment of verbal reasoning, data analysis, abstract reasoning, decision-making and judgment in real-life situations. > Apply for the MBBS programme. > The general and specific entrance criteria for the programme which must be fulfilled includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strong academic and co-curricular achievements; ● Good BMAT (UMalaya) score (registration at https://bmat.um.edu.my opens around November for early February exams) ● A good score in the interview. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Assessment through a series of MMIs, comprising a series of stations manned by an interviewer. > Each candidate spends about 40 minutes to complete the interview. > Focus is on assessing non-cognitive characteristics of the candidates, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Giving instructions ● Receiving instructions ● Emotional communication ● Problem solving ● Resilience and maturity ● Enthusiasm for medicine ● Ethics ● Awareness of common issues in medicine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Good scientific knowledge and co-curricular achievements. > Good problem solving and critical reasoning skills, able to communicate effectively, has empathy, is resilient and mature. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Malaysian students: RM13,710 (subsidised fees); RM300,000 (non-subsidised) fees. > International students: USD150,000 (RM624,675) > It's the candidate's choice on how they wish to apply for the programme. If they choose to apply through UPU, then they pay the subsidised fee. If they choose to apply through Saluran Terbuka Universiti Malaysia (SATU), then they pay the non-subsidised fee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Pusat Asasi Sains Universiti Malaya (PASUMI)/STPM/Matriculation: CGPA of 3.8 and above; or > A-Level: A minimum of 3As (Biology, Chemistry, Physics/Maths); or > International Baccalaureate Diploma (IB): A score of 36; and > SPM (Chemistry, Biology, Physics, English, Mathematics/ Additional Mathematics): minimum A-; and > MUET Band 4 and above. > A good score in BMAT (UMalaya) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Registration period for BMAT (UMalaya) is between Nov and Jan. Exam is in early February. > UPU online application is between Feb and mid-April. Interview is between May and June. > Successful candidates will be admitted to the Faculty of Medicine in Sept.
UKM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Register on the UPU system through the Education Ministry's website. > Shortlisted candidates will be called for interview. > MMI are conducted. Students are assessed through five stations. > Successful candidates will be given offer letters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > During the MMIs, candidates are tested on different aspects such as soft skills, resilience and ethics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Academic achievement. > MMI score. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Entrance through UPU: RM12,400 (total fee over 5 years). > Entrance through the UKM executive programme: RM400,000 (total fee over 5 years). > UKM-UNPAD programme (a six-year collaborative course with the first 3 pre-clinical years in Padjadjaran University in Bandung, Indonesia): RM310,000 (total fee over 6 years). > International students: USD119,047 (RM495,723.61) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > STPM, Matriculation, Asasi Pintar: A minimum CGPA of 3.8 in Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics or Physics; or > IB: 37 points with a minimum of 2 Science or Mathematics at the Higher Level and one Science subject at the Standard Level, and at least a score of 4 in Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics or Physics; or > A Level: A minimum grade of 2As and 1B or 1A and 2Bs (Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics or Physics); and > A minimum B in SPM (Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics or Additional Mathematics) and one other subject. > A minimum of Band 3 for MUET and passing the faculty's interview. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 7 months. > For executive programme and UKM-UNPAD entries, the application is open mid-August. It ends after the first week of September.
UPM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Register on the UPU system through the Education Ministry's website. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Each MMI station in the room will test students on skills ranging from from critical thinking, communication, professionalism and ethics, to their competency in Bahasa Malaysia and English. > Voluntary work among candidates is an advantage. > Marks will be given based on answers during MMI. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Candidates are screened based on the aspects tested during the interview because excellent results/curriculum point average (CGPA) alone does not guarantee a good doctor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > RM17,405 (5 years). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > UPM foundation students: CGPA 3.75 > Students from other foundation courses: CGPA 3.85 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 6 months.
USM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Register on the UPU system through the Education Ministry's website, except for the offshore medical programme in Belgium, India. > For the latter, candidates can apply through pohon@usm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > They will be asked whether they are genuinely interested to do medicine. > Will also be tested on whether they've done some research before coming; will be asked about medical subjects to see whether they are mentally prepared to do medicine. > Questioned on medical conditions. Detailed or scientific responses are not expected. Simple explanation will suffice, based on their knowledge of current affairs. > Different scenarios are also thrown to gauge the level of maturity and to test students critical thinking ability. > Special talents are an advantage, well rounded candidates are ideal. > Proper attire for the interview is taken into account. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > All components tested during the interview and their overall attitude. > Level of preparedness to live the life of a doctor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Malaysian students: RM1,800 per year. > International students: USD 27,500 per year. > Offshore programme in Belgium, India: Malaysian students: USD137,500 (5 years) (RM572,563.75). Scholarships for Malaysian students up to USD20,000 (RM83,282) are available. > International students: USD150,000 (5 years) (RM624,615) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > CGPA of 3.8 and above, depending on the number of candidates who apply for the academic year. > Also based on the Minimum Entry Requirements by the Malaysian Medical Council. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 6 months.

* The Education Ministry's centralised university unit (UPU) gives students the varsities of their choice based on academic merit. The UPU arranges where each candidate goes based on their selection. This is to avoid double offers to one candidate.