The UKCAT Examination
by Sayinthen Vivekanantham

The UKCAT is an important part of your Medical School application, with different institutions using your results from the exam in different ways. Even if you do not particularly want to go to a university that uses the UKCAT, it is important that you still do as well as you can, as you may change your mind later. And also, practise for the UKCAT will also be useful for other admissions test, for example the BMAT.

Your initial fears about the UKCAT prior to revising for it.

The UKCAT comprises of 4 sections- Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Abstract Reasoning and Decision Analysis- each of which examines different skills:

- Verbal Reasoning assesses a candidate's ability to read and think carefully about information presented in passages
- Quantitative Reasoning subtest assesses a candidate's ability to solve numerical problems
- Abstract Reasoning subtest assesses a candidate's ability to identify patterns amongst abstract shapes
- Decision Analysis subtest assesses a candidate's ability to decipher and make sense of coded information.

I had always known that I wasn’t as strong at Verbal Reasoning as a skill in general, so my initial thoughts were on how I could improve my score in this section. A lot of people say that you can’t significantly change your mark in the UKCAT through practise, as it depends purely on natural ability; however, I disagree with this. Practise can make you more familiar with the question types and answer them more quickly, and although you are not going to be given the same question content (unlike school exams), your skills required for each of the sections will improve.

For this reason, the section I devoted the most time to was Verbal Reasoning during my preparation. It is important for you to prioritise your practice in accordance with which section(s) your weaknesses lie, and plan your preparation accordingly. This is not to say that you should neglect the other sections, but perhaps devote a bit more time to your weaker areas.
When you started revising and how you planned your revision.

The key to performing well is starting your preparation as early as possible. Some candidates worry and stress about peaking at the right time, however, sometimes it is just an excuse not to do any work!

Having sat the exam myself, I believe there is no point after which further preparation will cause your skills to diminish. Nevertheless, after a certain point it is true to say that any further preparation can no longer improve your skills, and therefore, no longer improve your final mark.

It is a good idea to try and get your UKCAT out of the way as early as possible, so ideally at the start of the summer. There are two reasons for this:

1. You can always postpone the UKCAT exam if you think you’re not ready and need more time to prepare. If this was the case, you would have plenty of time to reschedule the exam to, before it clashes with school commitments.
2. The earlier you know your score, the earlier you can start deciding where to apply. This will give you more time to visit just the universities that you are interested in based on your UKCAT score.

I first booked my test in mid-July; however, as it came nearer to the exam date, I decided that I wasn’t fully prepared, so I moved the exam date to the beginning of August. I started to prepare from the start of July, nevertheless in hindsight, it would have been better if I had started my preparation earlier. I would recommend starting at least a month before the test date.

It is a difficult period to become motivated, as you have just sat your AS levels and would like to enjoy the summer sunshine. When your friends doing other courses are having a good time, you have to study! While, it’s important to have a balance, it’s only a difficult few weeks after which you have all the time in the world to relax.

Positive and negatives of all the resources you used and what your ideal resource would have included.

The main resource that I used was the book ‘Passing the UK Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT) and BMAT’ published by Law Matters Publishing. A new edition is released every year, which you may want to purchase or enquire whether it’s available at your school library.
This is a good resource for introducing you to the test and making you aware of it involves. However, it doesn’t include very many practise questions, and is limited in that it doesn’t give you very many tips about exactly how to approach the exam and the different sections. You have to work these out for yourself. Some of the more of the more expensive books and courses include comprehensive guides on how to approach the test. The other resource I used was the Internet which had a few free practice questions.

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It is important to be aware of exactly how much time you have available for each question in each section, and how to go about answering the questions. For example, in the Decision Analysis section, you should know exactly which patterns you will scan for at the beginning of each question.

*Your thoughts on the exam and what your greatest difficulties were.*

As you have probably heard, the timing is the hardest aspect of the UKCAT exam. I found the questions weren’t extremely challenging, but almost impossible to complete within the time that you are given.

For this reason it is important to practise doing the questions under timed conditions. The practise tests given on the UKCAT website ([www.ukcat.ac.uk](http://www.ukcat.ac.uk)) are good for this, and I would recommend doing the online practise tests about a week before your exam, so that you are able to establish and target your weaknesses in good time.

*Timing is the hardest aspect of the UKCAT exam*
You should time all the practise questions that you do, and should aim to complete the next set of practise questions in a shorter time. Practise makes perfect; the more questions you practise, the better you will be at the UKCAT!

Advice you wish you were given prior to the exam.

Naturally it takes time for you to adjust to the settings of the exam room where you sit the UKCAT, however, it is easy to let your mind wonder and not give your full concentration as you begin the exam. It took me about 10 minutes before I was operating at full concentration.

I am not entirely sure how one might avoid this, but possibly practising questions in different places, i.e. the school library rather than just at home, may help you establish your full concentration faster in the exam.

If you have any unanswered questions in the last 30 seconds of each section, remember to just select any answer to maximise your overall score. Although people say it is better to concentrate on a single question in the remaining time and make sure you get it correct, if you have about 10 questions left and randomly select the answers for these, you are likely to get 2-3 questions correct. This is better than just getting 1 question correct.

UKCAT score system that different Medical Schools use to give an Interview.

Different institutions use the UKCAT in different ways. Assuming you have fulfilled the minimum requirements, some use it as a cut-off to determine whether you will be given an interview. Other places compare it along side your personal statement/GCSEs/questionnaire (Nottingham) to decide whether you are given an interview, and some universities don’t use it at all. Imperial, UCL and Oxbridge do not use the UKCAT, but instead use the BioMedical Admissions Test (BMAT).

Exactly how much weighting is put on the UKCAT by different places varies from year to year. I would recommend emailing or calling admissions of the institutions which you are interested in applying to, so as to find out exactly how they will be using the UKCAT for your application.

Sometimes admission tutors decide on exactly how the UKCAT will be used once everyone has applied. If this is the case, try and find out information about the
UKCAT score thresholds for interview for the previous year's applications, and use this to determine whether you have a realistic chance of getting an interview.

*Marks you scored and Medical schools you were accepted at.*

I scored an average of 660 in each of the 4 sections giving me a total score of 2640. I performed worst in my Verbal Reasoning section which pulled down my average score; nevertheless, it was sufficient to get offers from Nottingham and Barts, the only two UKCAT universities that I applied to.

When I applied, Barts used just the UKCAT to determine who got an interview. If you scored above a certain score (which was decided after everyone had applied), you would be given an interview. Nottingham used my UKCAT score alongside my personal statement and a personal questionnaire that I had to send to them to decide whether I would receive an interview.

It is also worth noting that no universities (at the time of writing) look at your individual scores in each section, so there is no reason to worry if your score is particularly low in one section, as long as your overall average is high enough (ideally above 600).

The main challenge is keeping your calm in the exam, having a good strategy in terms of approaching the questions, and keeping your eye on the clock. Also remember to keep fit and have plenty of sleep, which will help you feel positive and increase your self-confidence.

Good luck!
The UKCAT Exam

by Zehra Imam

My friends from the years above said that the BMAT is for brainy people, whereas the UKCAT is for creative people. Having done both, I would partially agree with what I was told. I guess it’s said that the UKCAT is for creative people because it has four different sub-sections to it of which only one, the quantitative reasoning is academic. However, that is not to say that the UKCAT does not assess you comprehensively. When I first looked at a book for UKCAT I felt as if I was doing the 11+ entrance exams to secondary schools - the verbal reasoning and abstract reasoning sections were echoes of a distant memory, but on closer inspection the questions were much harder. What horrified me the most was that so many questions had to be done in so little time! It was bad enough that extra tests had to be done to get into Medicine let alone doing a computer based test. Furthermore it was frightening to know I would get my result as soon as I’d come out of the testing room.

I wanted to get the UKCAT out of the way before I started filling my UCAS form in and before the BMAT. Since the testing started in early June I planned to get it done and dusted around July so that I would have the remaining summer to work on my personal statement. I got a UKCAT practice book from Amazon called “Passing the UK Clinical Aptitude Test & BMAT 2008 edition”. I thought it was a really helpful book since it included guidance on not only how to write down a good personal statement but also practice questions for the UKCAT and the BMAT.

I planned my revision by first familiarising myself with the question types and understanding what exactly the test is about. Once I was familiar with the UKCAT I started testing myself under timed conditions. I have to admit in my first test I had gone over the time limit completely. Being my first test, I didn’t lose heart. I decided to do a couple of tests and improve my techniques. For Abstract Reasoning spend time on finding the pattern in the two groups given. I found Decision Analysis fun; again eliminate the options given as you decode the symbols.

Eventually I did start timing myself and yet still found I was out of time by dwelling on a few trickier questions. As common sense would suggest, I decided not to waste time with questions I struggled with - hazard a guess and attempt every question. Better to attempt every question then to answer a few questions well. I wasn’t being tested on how to find the answer but whether I actually got the right answer or not.
Gradually, with more practice, I started to finish the tests on time and the percentage of questions I got right, though fluctuated from time to time, increased generally. Nearer the test date, I started becoming more nervous, so much so that I extended my test date! There was little or no point in doing so. I don’t think I learnt anything more by gaining those extra five days. Also since I had ran out of questions from the book that I had, this extension of test date wasn’t very beneficial. My ideal resource would have included more practice questions, mock tests and some good techniques on how to do the questions on the UKCAT.

The night before the exam I could not sleep peacefully. I tried to calm myself down by keeping my mind off it. On the day, I found the touch screen deeply distracting. Also, if you’re used to high-tech computers you would not be very pleased to sit in a room with relatively outdated PCs. Due to the nature of the test it is easy for the mind to wander off. I didn’t quite realise sitting on your bottom for two hours so much requires stamina! I had always found the Decision Analysis section my forte and I knew time is the key in doing well in the UKCAT. Unfortunately, I started enjoying Decision Analysis and lost track of time that I had to rush in the last five questions. It all happened so fast. I was mentally drained after the test!

The UKCAT score is used differently at each medical school - it’s just another device that helps them assess a candidate. A score in the 600-region is said to secure you an interview. Having said that I know of people who got a score in the 400-region and yet still got into King’s College for Medicine. On the various open days I went to, the faculty admitted they didn’t know how quite to use the UKCAT in assessing the candidates. I’d recommend all the candidates to do their best. Don’t leave a stone unturned in your preparation for the UKCAT. Practice UKCAT questions as much as possible. Do a couple of questions every day at least. Don’t lose confidence if you don’t do too well.
St. George’s University of London was the only university I had applied to which required the UKCAT. I got a decent 620 average score and this along with my GCSEs results, AS results and predicted grades, I felt confident in getting an interview at St George’s. Even though the interview came quite late in the year, it came nonetheless. Don’t lose hope.

An interview could come up at any time of the year. Do your best in everything that you’re required to do to get into Medical School, and you’re bound to get good results.

Best of luck!