# Medical schools lower A-level requirements to boost diversity



Medical schools in the UK are increasingly accepting students with lower A-level grades as part of efforts to enhance diversity within the medical profession. A report by the Sutton Trust highlights a trend among some institutions to offer conditional places to candidates with BBC grades instead of the more typical AAA or higher. This initiative aims to assist disadvantaged individuals who have faced significant educational barriers, including low household income, residence in deprived areas, or experience in the care system.

The research, which involved analysis of nearly 94,000 applicants to medical schools in England from 2012 to 2022, indicates that only 5% of medical school entrants in 2021 came from disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to a startling 75% from more affluent environments. The Sutton Trust, in partnership with University College London, advocates for a more ambitious use of contextual offers—reduced grade requirements tailored to reflect individual candidates' circumstances.

The report asserts that disadvantaged students who have the potential for success often do not achieve results that truly reflect their capabilities within the existing educational framework. It suggests that medical schools should take these discrepancies into account, and any reduction in grade expectations should still be set at a level that ensures students are capable of managing the demands of their medical education. Currently, 17 medical schools offer so-called "gateway" courses that feature lower entry requirements alongside an additional foundation year to help these students prepare for the rigours of medical training.

Prominent examples of universities engaging in this endeavour include Bristol and Leicester. Bristol University has stated that its Gateway to Medicine course is specifically designed for students who demonstrate the potential to become doctors but do not meet the typical academic criteria for direct entry. Comments from university officials highlight the successful outcomes for many students who enter through such pathways, indicating they often achieve notable academic success while serving vital roles in the National Health Service (NHS).

Nick Harrison, chief executive of the Sutton Trust, commented on the current situation, stating, "Patients benefit from doctors who reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, but it's clear that we're a long way from that today." He further emphasized that barriers such as parental income or geographical background should not prevent capable individuals from pursuing a career in medicine.

In response to the report, Clare Owen, director of education at the Medical Schools Council, announced a goal for medical schools to ensure that up to 33% of their student body comprises young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by 2032, equating to approximately 6,000 students annually. This endeavour is anticipated to require collaborative efforts across the sector to optimise access to the medical profession.

Despite the push for broader acceptance criteria, some critics have raised concerns. Chris McGovern, from the Campaign for Real Education, expressed that medical schools should prioritise patient safety over diversity initiatives. He argued, “It is not acceptable for schools to blame below-par academic attainment on social background,” suggesting that an emphasis on intelligence is paramount in the selection process, as opposed to social considerations.

The findings of the Sutton Trust underlie a growing discourse in the medical sector regarding the balance between maintaining academic standards and fostering an inclusive environment that mirrors the diverse population it serves. Medical schools are thus positioned at a critical juncture, navigating the complexities of these dual imperatives as they move into the future.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2018/research/students-with-lower-a-levels-do-just-as-well/> - This article supports the idea that students with lower A-level grades from disadvantaged backgrounds can perform well in medical school, highlighting the need for contextualized admissions.
* <https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/contextual-admissions/> - This resource from the Sutton Trust discusses the use of contextual admissions to increase diversity in higher education, aligning with the report's advocacy for similar practices in medical schools.
* <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/2024/medicine/gateway-to-medicine/> - Bristol University's Gateway to Medicine course is an example of a program designed for students who do not meet traditional academic criteria, offering a pathway to medical education with lower entry requirements.
* <https://www.medicalschools.org.uk/news/medical-schools-council-sets-ambitious-targets-for-widening-participation> - The Medical Schools Council's goal to increase the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in medical schools reflects the broader effort to enhance diversity in the medical profession.
* <https://www.le.ac.uk/news/2023/january/leicester-medical-school-widening-participation> - The University of Leicester's efforts in widening participation in medical education are part of a broader trend among UK medical schools to increase diversity and accessibility.