Candidate prospectus for MRCP(UK) Diploma and Specialty Certificate Examinations

MRCPUK
Membership of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom
Welcome from the Medical Director

Examinations are a familiar part of the journey for medical students and junior doctors and, when you’re in the midst of all the hard work, it’s encouraging to keep the goal in sight. It’s about building your understanding and competence, and demonstrating that patients can place their absolute confidence in you as their doctor.

Whichever MRCP(UK) examination comes next in your career, we appreciate that it’s a significant investment of your time, effort and money. Therefore, we think you deserve as much information as possible so you can make the best decisions about your examinations, and prepare for success.

That’s why we’ve developed this prospectus, to explain the value the profession sets on your postgraduate medical examinations, their importance to patient care, and the work we put into ensuring that they are of the highest possible quality.

Three principles sum up what we mean by ‘quality’.

- First, the examinations are scrupulously fair. The rigorous methods we apply to construct and conduct the examinations ensure that all candidates have a level playing field.
- Second, the examinations are relevant. It is said that assessment drives learning, so MRCP(UK) examinations are designed with this in mind, encouraging you to build the knowledge and skills that will enable you to provide the very best of patient care.
- Finally, we want the examinations – and the trainees who pass them – to be clearly the best in postgraduate internal medicine. We are therefore committed to high levels of academic quality, high levels of candidate service, and high levels of performance for those who pass.

“We hope you find this guide useful – good luck in your future career and your examinations.”

Dr Andrew Elder, FRCP, FRCPG, FRCP
Medical Director, MRCP(UK)
Qualifications for confidence

Success in postgraduate medical examinations requires confidence. There is a lot at stake, so you need to be certain that your examinations are accurate, fair and widely recognised as a mark of excellence. You’ll also want to know that your examinations will be administered smoothly, so that you can concentrate on achieving the best results. Employers need objective proof of your qualifications, and patients need an assurance that you are a safe and competent doctor.

To achieve these high standards, thousands of people are working very hard behind the scenes to make the examinations a success.

Crucially, much of that work is carried out by practising physicians who reflect medicine at its best and represent the diversity of the profession. They design the examinations, continually ensure their academic quality, and assess your skills when you undertake the clinical component of the Diploma examinations. Because these senior physicians work on the wards and in clinics, caring for patients and training doctors, you can be assured that your examinations reflect the realities of everyday practice and the latest medical thinking.

We also have a busy staff team, who coordinate logistics and support the essential academic activities that ensure your examinations are truly world class. Our staff are dedicated to excellent customer service, and they are here to help with your application, organise all the practicalities on the day, and communicate your results securely and conveniently.

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Royal Colleges and your examinations

MRCP(UK) provides your examinations on behalf of the Federation of Royal Colleges of Physicians. The Federation is a partnership between:

- The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh
- The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow
- The Royal College of Physicians of London.

Passing all of your Diploma examinations is a key requirement for membership of the College of your choice. Once you have passed all three of these examinations, you may also use the postnominal MRCP(UK).

For the SCEs, we also work closely with the relevant specialist medical societies to produce your examination.

Our work is supported by the latest technology. For example, we have been investing heavily in computer systems to manage the bank of more than 30,000 questions that can be drawn upon to make up your examination papers. We’ve also developed the MRCP(UK) website, so you can manage your applications, make payments and see your results securely online. On the website, you’ll also find material to support your study, and we’re expanding these online resources all the time.

Underpinning all of this work is a sound governance structure that protects the quality and reputation of the examinations, and a strong evidence base to support decision making.

Because the examinations are such a serious commitment for you, we’d like to explain their place in your training, and in the regulation of the medical profession.

Your examinations are:

- an essential component of training for physicians in the UK
- mapped to the UK curriculum
- approved by the General Medical Council (GMC) as meeting the required standards
- recognised as a requirement for entry to specialist training and independent practice
- responsive to changes in UK training
- evidence based and informed by the latest research.
We provide the MRCP(UK) Diploma examinations for doctors who are preparing for higher specialist training, and the 12 different Specialty Certificate Examinations for physicians who are about to step up to consultant level. Each qualification is designed to build on your previous assessments. Because the examinations are mapped to the curriculum, they can help you direct your studies, showing you where to focus your attention. Your preparation will reinforce your medical education and training.

*This diagram illustrates the timeline of a UK physician in training, and shows where the examinations fit in at each stage.*

Examinations can feel like a hurdle, but it’s useful to see them as an integral part of your postgraduate medical training. Studying for the examinations gives you space to reflect, consolidate your learning, and reach up to the next level of knowledge and understanding.

Even if you are unable to achieve the results you want, this experience can also provide a learning opportunity, by identifying areas where you need to improve and helping you make decisions about how to progress your career. Good examinations are part of becoming a better doctor.

On the following pages, you can find more details about each of the examinations. You might want to read about all of them, or focus on the one you are approaching next.
Membership of the Royal Colleges of Physicians (UK) Diploma

This qualification is designed to test the skills, knowledge and behaviour of doctors in training. The MRCP(UK) Diploma has been approved by the General Medical Council (GMC) as the knowledge-based assessment for core medical training. It has three parts:

- MRCP(UK) Part 1
- MRCP(UK) Part 2 Written
- MRCP(UK) Part 2 Clinical (PACES).

Successful completion of the entire three-part examination is required before you can start specialist internal medicine training in the UK. Internationally, the MRCP(UK) Diploma is also a valued professional distinction.

“On the day I first set foot on the wards as a Medical Registrar I was glad to have the protective shield of MRCP(UK) around me.”
MRCP(UK) Part 1 Examination

Part 1 is the entry-level examination, accessible to doctors with 12 months of postgraduate medical experience. Its purpose is to confirm that you possess a broad knowledge and understanding of common and important disorders, as well as clinical science.

Success in Part 1 indicates that you have retained the knowledge acquired during your undergraduate training. Vitally, it also shows that your knowledge of medicine has expanded and kept pace with developments since your graduation, and that this knowledge continues to provide an appropriate basis for your clinical decision making.

As part of an integrated assessment programme mapped to the UK Core Medical Training curriculum, Part 1 is a valuable milestone that helps to prepare trainees for the more challenging Part 2 Written and Clinical examinations.

Assessment drives learning, and the acquisition of knowledge through revision is an important and useful discipline for junior doctors.

MRCP(UK) Part 1 at a glance

- one-day examination
- two papers
- three hours each
- 200 multiple choice questions (best of five)
- no images
- paper and pencil examination
- sat in an examination hall
- held three times a year
MRCP(UK) Part 2 Written Examination

This examination builds on the knowledge assessed in Part 1 (which you must pass before attempting Part 2). It tests your ability to apply clinical understanding, make clinical judgements and take responsibility for:

- prioritising diagnostic or problem lists
- planning investigation
- selecting a plan for immediate and long-term management
- assessing prognosis.

Part 2 takes place over two successive days. The format of 270 questions in three papers is based on evidence that a longer examination yields a more reliable outcome, resulting in a fairer test for candidates. The range of ability of candidates entering Part 2 is inevitably less broad in comparison with Part 1, since only those who have passed Part 1 can enter Part 2.

As a result of this, more questions are needed in Part 2 to ensure nationally acceptable standards of reliability are met. The further you advance in your training and examinations, the more important this statistical consideration becomes. That’s because with each step up, you and your peers are more narrowly matched in relation to ability, and more information is therefore needed to accurately identify different levels of achievement.

You do not have to complete this written examination before you attempt PACES – you may take them in either order.
MRCP(UK) Part 2 Clinical Examination (PACES)

The Practical Assessment of Clinical Examination Skills (PACES) is a high-profile part of the Diploma examination, and you’ve probably heard many stories about it from friends and colleagues. It is a memorable milestone in your medical training.

In PACES, you have the opportunity to demonstrate essential clinical skills, and that you are ready to provide a high standard of care to patients. There are five clinical stations where you will see either patients with a given condition, or trained stand-ins (surrogates). At each station, there are two independent examiners. They are senior physicians who have been recruited and trained to carry out PACES. These examiners will observe and evaluate your performance according to a formal mark scheme, which has been rigorously assessed and validated.

PACES at a glance
- half-day examination
- takes place in a clinical setting (hospital or clinical skills centre)
- assesses seven core skills
- five stations (see carousel diagram)
- eight patient encounters
- two independent examiners at each station
- each candidate is assessed independently by a total of 10 examiners
- held three times a year over several days

“During the examination, the examiners were exacting in their questioning while remaining courteous and polite. Logistically, it all ran very smoothly – there was never a moment when I was unsure where to go, and the organising registrar did her best to put people at their ease.”
Specialty Certificate Examinations (SCEs)

These qualifications have been developed in close collaboration with the UK specialist societies. Physicians in training must pass the appropriate SCE in order to gain admission to the GMC Specialist Register.

Candidates who pass the SCE will receive a certificate. Trainees who hold MRCP(UK), have gained the SCE and who are recommended for a CCT after completing training in a GMC-approved programme, will be entitled to apply for the postnominal MRCP(UK) (Specialty).

In addition to being a requirement for specialist physicians in the UK, the examinations provide an international benchmark for postgraduate medical education.

The SCEs test both your clinical knowledge and your understanding of the underlying science, at the high level expected for safe, competent, independent practice as a specialist physician. Passing the SCE is an objective demonstration of up-to-date knowledge with reference to an internationally recognised standard. Wherever you live and work, preparing for the SCE provides an intellectual stretch, and an opportunity to challenge the assumptions underlying your clinical practice. Each SCE is a computer-based test, which offers a high degree of flexibility in your choice of test centre.

SCEs at a glance

- one-day examination
- two papers
- three hours each
- 200 multiple choice questions (best of five)
- images
ever completed on a computer terminal
- sat in an invigilated Pearson VUE test centre
- held once a year

“

The challenging experience of preparing for the SCE improved my clinical practice and broadened the scope of my thinking.”

SCE specialties

The SCEs are offered for the following specialties:

- Acute medicine
- Dermatology
- Endocrinology and diabetes
- Gastroenterology
- Geriatric medicine
- Infectious diseases
- Medical oncology
- Nephrology
- Neurology
- Palliative medicine
- Respiratory medicine
- Rheumatology

The challenges of preparing for the SCE improved my clinical practice and broadened the scope of my thinking.”
When to take your examinations

Our regulations are designed to give you as much flexibility as possible, while also ensuring that you do not attempt the examinations before you could reasonably expect to be ready.

You can apply to sit the MRCP(UK) Part 1 Examination when you have 12 months’ experience in medical employment. After passing Part 1, you have the option to sit the MRCP(UK) Part 2 Written or Part 2 Clinical (PACES) examinations in either order, or simultaneously in the same assessment period.

This gives you a choice depending on your own individual circumstances and plans. You may find it helpful to discuss the timing with your peers and senior colleagues.

Each pass in the MRCP(UK) examinations marks a milestone in your career, and is the result of significant preparation and study. The examinations are challenging and, while hard work is required, getting the timing right is an important determinant of success.

We analyse our examinations intensively, and we also support academic research on their fairness and reliability. Our data have shown that pass rates are highest when candidates follow the guide timescales in the box below.

However, it is important to remember that individual situations differ, so we would always encourage you to discuss this decision with your clinical supervisor.

The Diploma examinations set a very high standard. If you are unsuccessful the first time, you can expect feedback to guide your preparation for a subsequent attempt. It’s also very helpful to discuss plans for your next steps with your clinical supervisor. Please be aware that regulations from the GMC limit candidates to six attempts on any postgraduate medical examination, so it’s important to feel fully prepared each time.

“...advice – start preparing early. Balance reading with practical clinical experience – in PACES, the commonest reason people fall short is failing to pick up the physical signs. The format may be a little different from exams you’ve taken in the past, but there’s a wealth of information on the MRCP(UK) website, not to mention the advice your colleagues who are involved with the exams, or have recently passed it themselves, can give.”
Preparing for your examinations

When you’re getting ready for your examinations, it’s best to accept all of the guidance you can. We also offer resources to support your studies. Here are a few tips to help you achieve your best possible results:

- Talk to your supervisor. Do they believe you are ready to attempt the examination? Every individual has their own strengths and weaknesses. Your supervisor knows you well, and they should also be able to help you identify areas that you need to work on.
- Talk to your peers. How are they preparing for the examination? Many trainees find it helpful to set up a study group. You can learn from one another, and it keeps your morale high.
- For PACES, the best way to prepare is to gain as much clinical experience as possible. Try to see a variety of patients, with both acute and chronic conditions.
- If your hospital is a PACES examination centre you can volunteer to help out with the running of the examination, which will help demystify the examination process and help you feel more at ease when it comes to your turn.
- Find out if your hospital runs an in-house PACES training course and if they don’t, why not suggest they start one?
- For all of the examinations, read widely. The examination is mapped to the curriculum you’re following, so let that guide your reading.
- Make sure you’re familiar with key UK guidelines, such as NICE and SIGN.

You’ll also find free resources on the MRCP(UK) website, including reading lists, practice questions for the written examinations, and sample scenarios and videos for PACES.

What to expect

We understand examinations can be stressful. An insight into what to expect can help to alleviate some of the nerves. Forward planning and being organised on the day also eases some of the pressure.

Confirmation details will be sent to you between two and six weeks in advance of the examination date. It varies according to which examination you are taking. This is the time to check the details are correct, ensure arrangements are in place for leave or cover with your colleagues, plan how you will get to the venue, and make final preparations. Everyone is different but this might include reading textbooks, taking part in study groups with your peers, or simply talking to a colleague who has taken the examination recently.

Checklists

Before the examination:
- Check confirmation details carefully.
- Look up the venue and plan how you will get there on the day.
- Confirm cover or leave arrangements.
- Book any travel and accommodation.
- Read the candidate information to ensure you are familiar with it and understand the rules and regulations.

On the day of the examination:
- Ensure you have identification to prove who you are, and that it matches your confirmation details. You will be turned away if this is not the case. We have a strict policy of ‘no ID, no entry’.
- Set out in plenty of time.
- Dress appropriately – all venues are different and temperature can vary.
- Stay vigilant and report any suspicious behaviour that suggests collusion or cheating.
Information and contacts

Website
The MRCP(UK) website is packed with practical information and guidance, including examination dates, sample questions and Frequently Asked Questions. For some examinations, you can apply and pay online, and keep track of your results. You’ll also find the latest contact details for staff who can help with any practical queries regarding your particular examination.

www.mrcpuk.org

Twitter
Follow MRCP(UK) on Twitter to find out what everyone’s talking about, and connect with other trainees who are preparing for the examinations.

Examinations@MRCPUK

YouTube
Watch practical examples of PACES on YouTube for guidance on how the examination runs.

http://www.youtube.com/user/MRCPUKonline