

Passing the MRCPsych Exams - an Insiders' Guide

*Updated Second edition (2017) by Dr Andrew Bailey MRCPsych & Dr Donna Arya MRCPsych
First edition (2010) by Dr D Middleton MRCPsych, Dr M Impey MRCPsych & Dr A Lomax MRCPsych*

Disclaimer: The following document is the view of the above trainees only. All the authors are/were members of the Psychiatric Trainees' Committee (PTC). It does not represent the official view of the College, the Psychiatric Trainees' Committee or the exams department.

The MRCPsych exam consists of two written papers and a practical CASC exam. The written papers can be sat in various centres around the UK and also in Malta, Hong Kong, Oman, India and Singapore. The CASC exam can be sat in Sheffield and also in Hong Kong and Singapore.

MRCPsych Paper A can be sat by any fully registered medical practitioner. In order to sit MRCPsych Paper B you must either be on an approved training programme or you are in a post recognised by your hospital or trust as having contracted time and funding for educational training.

You are eligible to sit the CASC exam if you have 24 months' whole time equivalent post-foundation / internship experience in psychiatry and you have passed papers A and B and you have sponsorship in place and you can demonstrate one of the following:

If your post is within a programme of approved training that you have successfully completed the Annual Review of Competence Progression by the time you apply for CASC.

For all other posts, that you have successfully completed an assessment portfolio showing achievement of equivalent competencies to those defined in the ARCP to include competencies in Psychotherapy and either Child and Adolescent Psychiatry or Learning Disability.

The CASC can be a particular challenge if English isn't your first language or if your medical or psychiatric training was in a language other than English. It can also prove challenging if you are unfamiliar with the National Health Service (NHS) or the structure of psychiatric care provision within the UK. A reasonable knowledge of this is important as stations on patient management often rely on candidates being aware of these things. Additional support for International Medical Graduates is available through numerous channels including your clinical or educational supervisors, training programme directors or heads of school or through the College.

General Advice for the Written Papers

Preparation is needed for the written exams and we would suggest you start thinking about starting your revision at least three months before each one. Although it can be difficult to balance exam revision with a full-time job, it is possible with good organisation and discipline. On top of this, many people have other commitments such as children which make revision even harder to fit in. It might have been years since you sat your medical school exams and it is likely to take some time for you to get back into the swing of things again. One strategy could be to start with half a day each weekend or a couple of evenings per week then build up the amount of time as you get closer to the exam. There will be times when you just can't do any revision, for example during weeks of night shifts. Although people understandably try to fit in as much studying as possible in the run up to the exam, it is also important to spend some time

relaxing and doing enjoyable things too. Rather than making your time less efficient, allocating some time for relaxing is instead likely to make the time you spend on revision more productive.

A good first step would be to study in detail the College examination web pages. There are details of the syllabus, regulations, frequently asked questions and lots more bits and pieces that are useful to know. Google 'MRCPsych examinations' to find the official College website.

In terms of what to revise, make sure you look carefully at the syllabus for each exam on the College website to check the areas you need to cover in your revision. There is no point covering areas which don't appear in the exam and your time would be better spent learning things which will be. Although the proportion of questions in each subject area is worth bearing in mind, it isn't the only factor. It would likely be better when allocating your time to try and concentrate on the areas you find most challenging instead.

The biggest change over recent years in terms of the written exams has been the move from three written papers to two. There are now two written exams, paper A and paper B, each consisting of 200 questions over three hours. The exams contain both multiple choice questions (MCQs) and extended matching items (EMIs) with a rough split of 2/3 MCQ and 1/3 EMI.

Paper A covers

Behavioural science & socio-cultural Psychiatry
Human development
Classification & assessment in psychiatry
Basic neurosciences
Clinical psychopharmacology

Paper B covers

Organisation & delivery of psychiatric services
General adult psychiatry
Old age psychiatry
Psychotherapy
Child & adolescent psychiatry
Substance misuse / addictions
Forensic psychiatry

Psychiatry of learning disability Critical review

The critical review component of paper B comprises 1/3 of the paper with the remaining 2/3 covering the remaining clinical topics (of which around 30% will be general adult psychiatry).

There is no negative marking in these exams so it is important to answer each question in the exam, even if you aren't certain it's correct. Timing is key in the written exams and it is really easy to run out of time if you don't pace yourself and practice this in your revision. It is important to do both background reading and practice questions – doing either one or the other won't work. You need to be able to recognise the way questions will be asked in the exam so it won't come as a shock but also have done sufficient background reading so you can deal with questions you've not seen before. There are numerous revision books, websites, courses and other resources available though remember that more expensive doesn't always mean better. We have given a list of ones we've used or heard are good below. As a first step, have a look at the sample questions on the college website; these are free and are similar to the questions you can expect in the exams.

Revision courses

Revision courses generally come in two types; classroom-based and online. Of the classroom-based courses, a number are run by for-profit companies. Many training programmes however incorporate a local MRCPsych course within their educational teaching programme – these are often subsidised with the cost being covered by your study leave budget. There are differences between regions as to how these courses are funded and what they include. They should be mapped to the MRCPsych curriculum although you will need to do additional studying in your own time to ensure all areas are covered. There is variation in quality between courses – if you feel yours could be improved or doesn't cover things you feel are important, please get in touch with your training programme director or head of school. Deanery-based courses tend to run

weekly over the course of an academic year with for-profit courses tending to be more intensive, often being held in the run-up to the exam. These tend to go through past questions then discuss the answers and usually include food, coffee etc throughout the day for the not-insubstantial price. These types of course can be easily found on the internet and include ones run by Superego Café, The Birmingham Course, The Oxford Course and SPMM (Success in Psychiatric Membership Masterclass).

Classroom courses tend to be far more expensive than the online ones but some of the online courses are slow to be updated and occasionally have errors in them. SPMM and The Birmingham Course both have online practice questions you can pay to access and their sites also have very comprehensive revision notes which you get access to if you pay for the questions (although note that you can't print out the SPMM ones).

MRCPsych Mentor and the BMJ's OnExamination sites are also both worth checking out and have now been updated to reflect the new paper A & B curricula. The Superego Café online course is composed of access to revision notes rather than questions, useful and well written, but you would need access to some practice questions somehow too. They have included in this some online tutorials including for critical appraisal which we found useful.

In a world where doing exams seems to cost half your salary, there are some freebies on the net. For example, www.trickcyclists.co.uk is a free site that lets you have access to notes and true / false practice questions. It is an MRCPsych veteran and hasn't been much updated since the exams changed but still has some useful tips. There are also numerous free fora where people share questions and discuss exam-related queries and problems. Be slightly wary of these as people often remember questions incorrectly or provide incorrect answers.

Trainees Online - this is a series of e-learning modules that have been written by higher trainees

who have passed the MRCPsych. It is fully-endorsed by the college and the content has been checked by the exams committee at the college to ensure it is linked to the syllabus. It is currently provided free to all trainees in the UK and is a good resource to quickly get your head around a topic.

Using past questions can be a frustrating experience and in some cases, the exact answer may be impossible to find. Even when the answer is known or given, quite why that answer is correct is often unclear. Look into these if you want, though remember that the idea of exams is to test people as far as possible and that can include some pretty obscure knowledge.

There is also the question of whether to revise in a study group, whether to revise on your own or indeed do a combination of the two. This is a decision for each individual and depends on what you have found helpful in the past and what kind of person you are – some people will be driven to study more by knowing what other people know or can do whereas others will just get panicked by it. It can however be useful to share resources such as books within a group.

Try and keep life going whilst you do your exams. Keep eating healthily and keep doing some exercise even if that's only a walk to the shops. Keep seeing friends and give yourself some time off to relax. The night before the exam don't revise, just go to the cinema or do something else you find fun!!

We're sure you don't need any advice about what to do when the exam is over! Try not to dwell on it too much and bear in mind that through a process of selective abstraction / arbitrary inference we tend to remember the questions we got wrong and forget the ones we got right. When the results come out we hope you pass but if you haven't, don't be too hard on yourself. Many people have to re-sit exams and, although it might feel it at the time, it isn't the end of the world. It can feel terrible if your colleagues pass but you don't and although it might feel as though you're the only

one in this situation, you really aren't. Take some time to get your mind round it, work out when the next sitting is and try again. The feedback you will get from the College if you don't pass a written paper only tells you which general areas you should work on rather than specific questions you got incorrect but use this information to try and guide your revision for next time. Tackle these more difficult areas first rather than revising areas you are already good at.

Books we found helpful for the written exams

Symptoms in the Mind by Andrew Sims - a classic book you can dip in and out of – for the psychopathology part of the exam.

Fish's Clinical Psychopathology: Signs and Symptoms in Psychiatry by Patricia R. Casey & Brendan Kelly - easier to read than Sims so can be read cover to cover easily.

Oxford Handbook of Psychiatry by David Semple et al - this might sound silly and way too basic for MRCPsych but it's really not. It's small and portable, which is an advantage. It has good lists for random stuff like the 'Culture Bound Syndromes' and history of psychiatry, as well as good summaries of just about every psychiatric and neurological illnesses, symptoms, epidemiology and treatment. It is good for both of the written papers though you may need more detail in some areas.

Neuroanatomy: An Atlas of Structures, Sections and Systems by Duane E. Haines - if you can't get back into a dissection room, this book contains good pictures and can help jog your memory.

Stahl's Essential Psychopharmacology: Neuroscientific Basis and Practical Applications by Stephen M. Stahl - this is a brick of a book that is impossible to read cover to cover but has a great system of pictures for each drug to help you remember what receptors / side effects each one has.

The Doctor's Guide to Critical Appraisal by Narinder Gosall and Gopal Gosall - this is written

by the people who run the Superego Café Revision courses. It's an easy read and goes into the right depth of knowledge.

Psychology for the MRCPsych by Marcus Munafo – this was published some time ago and was based on the previous exam structure but still contains lots of relevant and well-written information.

Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines by David Taylor et al. Some prescribing questions appear to be taken directly from this. Side effects, doses and contraindications are worth learning if you have time.

The CASC

The CASC is an OSCE-style clinical exam made up of 16 stations in total. There is one circuit of eight stations in the morning and one circuit of eight stations in the afternoon. The previous linked stations have been scrapped.

Any clinical topic can come up and only the most impractical scenarios are off-limits. Commonly tested stations include:

- Brief history taking e.g. psychosis, depression
- Collateral history e.g. in dementia
- Risk assessment following self harm
- Information-giving e.g. ECT, medication, psychological therapies
- Discussing management plans with consultants or other members of staff e.g. nursing students or ward managers.
- Physical examination e.g. EPSEs, cardiovascular, neurological

The CASC tests knowledge and communications skills such as history taking, explanation & advice, breaking bad news and managing challenging consultations.

When you first look into the CASC exam, the pass rate may not fill you with optimism about passing it. However, having a rough idea of what the CASC involves at the start of your training and looking at the requirements in more detail when

you are preparing for the papers is a good idea. When studying for the written papers, start thinking about how you would take a history for the topics you are preparing and read the relevant leaflets for patients - imagine you are explaining it to a patient or relative. It may even make revising for the written papers less abstract!!

Speak to trainees who have sat the CASC. There is also information available online about past stations. You will need to train your body to recognise what seven minutes feels like - timed practice as early as possible is very important. Mock exams are a good way to prepare for the range of skills you have to demonstrate in a short period of time and also developing the ability to quickly change from one task to another. There are 'OSCE timers' apps available that have a one minute warning bell and an 'end of examination' prompt which creates the right amount of anxiety / anticipation to prepare you for the big day.

Practical issues during the exam

You get a short period of time before each station. There is no defined way to use this time but make sure you do use it! You may decide to take notes but don't let this distract you from thinking about the question. You may just want to write down the name of the patient and the key task that you have been asked to undertake, and a few areas you'd like to cover. You can also take notes during the first stations of each linked pair details will stick in your mind and you will be given another task with some information for the linked station. Taking notes can be a welcome distraction to the station and you won't be as present in the station.

The UK sitting of the CASC takes place at the English Institute of Sport in Sheffield. It is held in a big room with several circuits going on at once. Noise carries and this includes the examiners and role-players talking to each other between candidates. Listen if you want but it might not always be positive comments and may derail you if things have not gone as well as you thought. Remember it's only the opinions of people who

have seen you for a few minutes in an already stressful setting.

There are no rest stations on the circuits but you potentially have several hours to wait between the morning and afternoon sessions. There is enough time to have a good lunch and get focussed on the afternoon (though don't rely on the café in the venue being open!). Some people like to talk through the stations they have just sat with friends, others might find this frustrating and unhelpful. Remember there is nothing you can do to change things and need to try and focus instead on the afternoon stations. What has gone on however may also highlight things which you have missed out which can then be remembered for the second circuit.

During each station, let the role-player set the initial agenda but make sure you steer things in the right direction later on if needed.

Summarising is useful to double-check information and re-focus the interview. Listen for cues and address anxieties when they appear. Don't be afraid to answer questions, even if the answer might not be something the patient might want to hear – this may be the only way to move on. Be careful not to ask double questions – the actor might only answer one of the parts.

Books we found helpful for the CASC

CASC books are far from perfect. One of the most popular is 'Pass the CASC' by Dr Seshni Moodliar. This has a list of all the stations that have previously come up and is a good way to map out your revision. The content is comprehensive but some phrases suggested in the book have not served candidates well.

Although not written for the exams, 'Psychiatry: Breaking the ICE Introductions, Common Tasks, Emergencies for Trainees' by Sarah Stringer is an excellent all round book. It's a practical guide to working as a psychiatry trainee and covers all commonly encountered situations. Many of these give good advice that would help in passing CASC.

The Maudsley Handbook of Practical Psychiatry has a section on special interview situations. This has some good advice about how to manage challenging situations.

Preparing for the CASC:

Have a plan and stick to it. Plan out each day where you work through a list of previous stations together. Find someone you want to spend the day with and practice regularly. Make it fun and schedule in breaks. Be honest with each other when giving feedback. Check that your practice is going in the right direction by asking trainees who have passed the CASC for feedback. Many trainees find that organising a small group of three to four trainees who are all about to sit CASC and meeting regularly to go through stations, practicing your approach and learning from each other can be a great way to prepare. If you are in a more rural location and struggle to meet up, consider regular Skype meet-ups instead.

Courses and mock exam

Different courses offer different things. The main focus of CASC courses is practice of different kinds of stations. How these are organised can differ; for example whether candidates take turns to complete stations or do whole circuits. Courses will tend to be staffed by different levels of psychiatrists, from higher trainees to consultants and, very usefully, might include college examiners themselves. The role players will usually include several who also do the exam itself.

Communication skills and clinical skills are often covered within local deanery-run MRCPsych courses. These often include CASC scenarios and can be helpful in the run up to exams. This may be particularly true if communication skills weren't focused on at your medical school or if English is not your first language. There are also a number of private providers which vary in terms of content, cost and quality. Some focus on communication skills (e.g. Oxford course), some courses contain actual CASC scenarios but with limited feedback (e.g. SPMM) and others offer individual practice stations via Skype with

consultants, higher trainees and CASC actors (e.g. Cognitions for CASC).

Conclusion

Exams are hard work. They are designed to push you and the best thing to do is rise up to the challenge and do as well as you can. Don't lose sight of the future – a lot of exam knowledge will be forgotten but some will stay with you for many years. You'll probably never know more than you do during revision time! Hope for the best but don't let being unsuccessful at an exam put you off your career goals – keep persevering and you'll get there!!

Good luck to you all!

Conflicts of interest:

Dr Andrew Bailey – none noted

Dr Donna Arya – Tutor on the Cognitions for CASC course