Retaking the MRCGP AKT exam
Guidance for GP Trainees

This document should be read in conjunction with our '3 steps to reflect' webpage: https://www.rcgp.org.uk/mrcgp-exams/mrcgp-important-info/exam-resit-support

Disclaimer

This booklet is intended as a positive, additional educational resource based on the experiences of multiple trainees and educators across the four nations. We trust that the style and content is not regarded as patronising or inappropriately basic.

Much of what is included may not be relevant to your situation, but we hope that there will be some practical relevance which can be used to help you and your educational support team better understand your unique needs as you strive to succeed at the AKT.

We cannot and do not want to dictate what is available in your specific geographic educational training environment but feel confident that the GP Education leads in your area can signpost you to the most appropriate local sources of help.

Emotional impact

Whether you are reading this immediately after receiving your AKT results, or sometime later, it is undoubtedly a significant, emotional time – for you and those close to you.

Reflecting on your own emotions and response to challenging news is difficult. Commonly there may be self-doubt with reduced confidence, but also possible feelings such as anger, anxiety, low mood, and defensiveness.

To put it simply, being unsuccessful at a postgraduate medical exam for which you have worked hard clearly hurts. You are, by definition, an intelligent professional wanting to contribute to a career in NHS primary care. However, now the exam can feel like a huge barrier to your plans. Please make sure you start talking about your feelings to people you trust – family, friends, and senior educators. Sadly, it is not uncommon to hear of situations where a trainee has kept this all to themselves. It is not easy, but much better to share and take time to reflect on what you can do next.

A result very close to the pass mark brings its own inevitable upset, but in this situation do recognise that you are doing lots of things correctly already.

If you or others close to you feel that you may need help with psychological or physical health problems please consider speaking to your own GP. Also, arrange an urgent meeting with your Educational Supervisor (ES) or senior local GP Educator. Other resources are available such as professional support unit or occupational health expertise.

What next?

Hopefully you can work through the cycle of emotions that the result initially triggered, before being able to sit down with your ES and calmly plan together what changes need to be made.

Discussing your readiness to resit with a senior GP Educator.

- What do you both feel are your immediate and priority developmental needs?
- When is the next AKT application window?
- Is the timescale appropriate when considering both the preparation you have already done, and the improvement needed in your score to pass?

The following pages outline an example, structured approach to how you and your senior GP Educator might want to review what you do.

A structured approach to your own performance review and re-sit planning

The following questions are intended as a guide to help ensure you cover a broad range of areas, all of which can be relevant to your future success. Which of the following do you recognise, which do others recognise about you and what could be your and your ES's unknown unknowns?

Take time to consider the following and then debate your thoughts with your ES/senior GP Educator:

- What worked well for you in previous undergraduate or postgraduate exams?
- What did you do well in preparation for this last exam?
- What reduced your ability to prepare as well as you would have liked last exam? (Consider internal as well as external blockers)?
- What is affecting your ability to prepare as well as you would like for your next exam? (Consider internal as well as external blockers)?
- What do you need to stop doing to increase your chances of success?

Background

- What is similar and what is different about the school education, undergraduate training assessment systems, UK primary care and assessment cultures and geographical areas you are working in now compared to your own upbringing and experiences?

Work-life challenges

- Being a GP Trainee is a busy time, often in association with many other responsibilities in your personal, social, and non-medical life. What can you do/not do to gain protected, effective personal study time?
- How can your ES realistically help you with any necessary changes?

Workplace opportunities for learning

- The AKT is written by working GPs. In a past review, Trainers - who were asked to sit the exam without revising - all passed. (The majority admitted post-exam that they had re-visited data interpretation and traditional medical statistics)
- This means that your Trainer's input is highly relevant to you and your success
- Trainers are ideally placed to share their differential diagnostic and problem-solving skills with you
- Talk through clinical scenarios
- Maximise clinical time with patients
- Do some single best answer MCQ style primary care questions together.
- 'Think aloud' as you choose the single most appropriate answer. What is different about your Trainer's approach to answering a question that they are unsure about compared to yours?

- Have you looked at 'Preparing to take the MRCGP Applied Knowledge Test (AKT). A concise guide for trainees.'?
- Has your Trainer looked at our 'What can Trainers do to help candidates prepare for the AKT?' booklet? If not, we suggest you print off a copy and ask your Trainer to look at it with you
- Are you using the free RCGP Self Test question bank to highlight educational need?

Support from others outside work

- You need to feel able to confidently reach out to others and ask for help. This might be more difficult than you envisaged but think of exam preparation as needing a team around you.
- Do you need more help with childcare, household responsibilities or emotional support?
- Do you need to (temporarily) reduce commitments in other areas of your life?
- Do you need to ask your Trainer/ES/TPD/AD or HoS what other help is available?

There are more resources available than you realise.

Neurodiversity and specific learning differences (SpLD)

Do you feel you have a neurodiversity such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, or ASD that significantly affects you in the workplace or in assessments? If so, please discuss this with your senior GP Education team. If you are not sure, ask those who you trust and know you well what they think?

- There may be something about how you naturally process information and work which potentially adversely impacts on your assessment performance. This may be something you are/are not currently aware of, or have never had considered at school or university
- The earlier this is considered and ruled in or out, the better you can plan
- How we all learn and process information is different. These differences bring individual strengths and sometimes challenges
- The identification of a learning difference is not a 'diagnostic illness' and has no stigma attached
- We recommend SpLD screening is considered by an appropriate local GP Education team for anyone unsuccessful at their first sitting of the AKT exam.
- If screening highlights an increased likelihood of having a SpLD, then your local GP Education team will know which specialist to approach for more expert assessment and help
- Many doctors with a confirmed SpLD have subsequently highlighted the benefits to them, both in assessments but also in the workplace, of having gained better insight into how they process information and best work

Reasonable adjustments (RAs)

This section should be read in conjunction with our detailed information on: https://www.rcgp.org.uk/mrcgp-exams/4-mrcgp-important-info/5-mrcgp-equality-diversity

The Equality Act 2010 requires the RCGP to make reasonable adjustments where a candidate, who is disabled within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, would be at a substantial disadvantage in comparison to someone who is not disabled. The RCGP is committed to take reasonable steps to overcome that disadvantage.

A new diagnosis of SpLD can take time to get used to and feel comfortable about. Do factor the time required for this into any readiness to sit discussions with your education team. Being awarded additional time in the exam might be helpful on its own, but there is likely a much wider range of advice and practical tips, also of relevance to the workplace, which can take time to fine tune to your own style.

The following applies if you have had RAs in previous exams or are now advised by a recognised expert that you need RAs at your next exam sitting;

- Please ensure that you have the appropriate evidence to support your request
- Please submit your application in a timely manner (as detailed on the exam application website)
- Late requests cannot be accepted so please don't miss the advertised exam deadlines

Needs assessment

The following can all contribute to better understanding knowledge gaps:

- **Undergraduate training** – how similar was this to other medical schools? For example, how much traditional medical statistics and critical reading was taught? If not much, then make this an early priority to understand how the AKT tests on data interpretation
- **Previous undergraduate and postgraduate assessments** – have you experience of exams during your training to date with single best answer (SBA) style questions? If not, or very little, then this is likely very relevant to you. 'Talking out loud' as you work through examples with your ES can again be very beneficial to you both understanding the efficiency of your approach to this style of assessment
- **Data interpretation –** this will be tested in every AKT. How confident are you when looking at charts, graphs or comparative data in tables?
- **Organisational** – how well do you understand the organisation and regulations that apply equally across primary care in the four home nations?
- **Postgraduate training to date** – what gaps exist in your own training? The AKT tests across the very broad GP Curriculum and if, for example, you have not done a paediatric or gynaecology attachment then you very likely need to invest more time to increase your primary care relevant knowledge and skills than someone who has had that experience

- **Knowledge gaps**
    - Every time you look something up in the BNF, use online guidance such as NICE/SIGN, undertake a medical search on Google, or ask a colleague, then you are likely identifying a relevant learning need for your next AKT exam
    - Brief professional conversations with other health care professionals in your team are invaluable sources of knowledge gap analysis
    - CS, ES, and wider feedback
    - A recent review highlighted that almost 30% of clinical scenarios in the AKT have a direct therapeutics context. So, it is important to identify what (else) you can specifically address as regards safe and appropriate prescribing
    - Question banks such as RCGP Self Test
    - Self-rating across the Curriculum Topics
    - Exam feedback
        - Your personal previous domain scores might help you if your scores in a specific domain are significantly low compared to the mean score of your peers
        - Whatever the domain feedback, don't overlook that 80% of the AKT is primary care-based clinical scenarios
        - Use the Exam Feedback summaries published on the MRCGP AKT website after every exam. The AKT Examiners highlight areas or topics causing (regular) difficulty, but which they identify as being important to continue to test in future exams. Ignoring this source of advice is inevitably a risk to your chances of success

Study skills

Having succeeded to this stage of training you will have good study skills and have been successful at previous medical exams on many occasions in the past.

Reflect on which skills worked well that you could still utilise, and which are now unrealistic in a busier period of your life.

Successful people are usually organised in their approach to exams.

You need to set aside enough time with enough of a lead-in timescale recognising that this is a challenging, but achievable exam.

Practical study skills

- Review all the MRCGP AKT exam guidance, even if you have looked at it before. Some will have been updated and a review will often highlight something now relevant to you which was less so before. We have had positive feedback from educators and previously successful colleagues, who all agree that the free resources are highly relevant to effective exam preparation.
- Once a list of priorities is established, you need to ensure how you are going to address these, and in what context. This includes self-study, small group VTS work, small group peer virtual revision study groups, GP Trainer or other MDT member professional conversations and tutorials, online revision courses, question banks (whether GP Self-Test or private organisations). Remember to increase the diversity of learning opportunities you use to maximise your learning in relation to your previous experience
- Why not write simple questions after reading around a topic? These can be used to test your own recall later and help your peers when efficiently revising together
- If your list of identified clinical knowledge gaps is significant then discuss this with your ES to help you prioritise
- When planning revision apportion what time feels right to you in each priority area, being realistic of all your other commitments and your own energy and wellbeing
- It is not effective to sit at a computer for hours after a long, tiring workday
- Plan for protected time when you feel energised. This available 'effective study time' may be a lot less in terms of total hours than you imagine – so plan accordingly
- Consider what length of study time is the maximum for you and your memory, for example, after 45 minutes why not change position and have a 10-15 minute break? Get up, move around, do something different to re-energise your brain and body
- Consider how to make each section of study varied e.g. online, book, MCQs, podcast, video, walk and talk and/or professional conversations
- When you finish a session, make a short assessment of where to start the next protected time revision session, tackling areas of identified need rather than re-visiting topics you feel more comfortable with
- Do you procrastinate? If so, you need to analyse why and do something more effective and efficient with your (limited) time.
- Why not reward yourself for achieving a set target? What motivates you?
- Don't overlook the fact that 10-minutes with your ES on a clinical area causing you difficulty is 10-minutes of highly relevant exam preparation
- Spending 100% of revision time repeatedly answering questions from a question bank (none of which are written by the AKT team) to superficially rote learn the answers is clearly not recommended, but nor is avoiding question banks altogether. Use question banks to identify gaps and then look elsewhere to develop a deeper understanding of that identified topic area.
- Superficial learning for exams is boring, inefficient, and frequently inadequate, whereas deeper understanding can also bring workplace benefits
- Link learning to a variety of methods and real-life scenarios
- What works for other people may be very different for you

- What is your preferred VARK learning style? Understanding this can maximise your learning
- Look at relevant national guidance and make focussed, practical summaries
- Be prepared to have to adapt your study plan, however realistic it was. Build in some time for flexibility
- Include protected time off with your family, friends or for hobbies
- Don't ignore your own wellbeing otherwise that can significantly reduce your chances of achieving what you want
- Do include working with peers. Virtual meetings need no time and little organisation, but those involved need to be strict with time management. If you can articulate your understanding to others about a topic you find difficult, you are not only helping them but are helping hard wire this into your longer-term memory. Others in a group will also look at things differently to you, which is helpful. Be supportive but appropriately challenging in your feedback to each other. Don't stick to areas you feel comfortable with!
- A great way to analyse if you understand a topic is to write a couple of MCQ style questions for others to debate/answer

Exam technique and Resources

- Please see our booklet 'Preparing to take the AKT – a concise guide for trainees'

Exam week and exam day

- You can't rely on being a last-minute person, even if this is your natural preference. This means planning your days running up to the exam carefully
- Negotiate with your colleagues to avoid night shifts or long duty days close to the exam date
- How would an athlete prepare for a big event? Exam preparation is effectively little different. Think about your own sleep, nutrition, hydration, and relaxation
- Please ensure you have the correct, matching ID, and know the travel times on busy commuter days to the test centre, where to park etc
- Plan to arrive early – sadly at every exam there is more than one person who arrives too late to be permitted to sit the exam
- What works best for you to reduce natural exam nerves?
- Are breathing exercises or positive visualisation helpful to you?
- How can you avoid the transference of the stress of others in the room onto yourself?

We all recognise that the exam day may be even more stressful if you are resitting the AKT. Do you need to do anything different to manage exam related anxiety, well in advance of the exam?

Summary

Take some time to now consider your own priorities based on your current thoughts and this document.

Make a brief outline of your action points, a realistic revision timeline and book a follow up review discussion with a GP Educator.

Do you need to consider more in-depth support? If so, please discuss this further with your local Education team - for example, what is available through your local Professional Support Unit?

The AKT team wish you well and hope you get the success you are working towards.

We welcome feedback on this document via:
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