Identifying applicants' core values

Physician associates are medically trained, general healthcare professionals who work alongside doctors and within multidisciplinary teams. The role requires a postgraduate qualification such as the Physician Associate Studies MSc at the University of Leeds. This course uses the Cambridge Personal Styles Questionnaire (CPSQ) for healthcare, from Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing, as part of the admissions process. CPSQ for healthcare is an online assessment used by employers, nursing schools and medical and healthcare facilities to assess the behavioural competencies relevant to healthcare education and work.

CPSQ was first used as part of the MSc admissions process in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, explains Dr Helen Millott, Programme Lead for the MSc course and Michelle Ellwood, Radiographer Lecturer and Director of Student Education: 'We quickly needed a reliable online alternative to in-person Multiple Mini Interviews (MMIs). These are used to determine whether a candidate's core values are aligned to those of the NHS, such as person-centred care, communication skills, logical thinking and problem-solving.' CPSQ was recommended by admissions colleagues at the University of Leeds Institute of Medical Education, who use the BioMedical Admissions Test (BMAT), from Admissions Testing, when assessing applicants to medical and dentistry courses. 'As CPSQ assesses a range of relevant competencies, such as care and compassion, person-centred communication and working well with others, it seemed to be a good solution,' they say.

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Supporting the shortlisting process

Although MMIIs have now moved online, CPSQ remains a key part of the admissions process. ‘CPSQ has proved to be a good step in the shortlisting process. It makes it more robust, and provides insights which are harder to gain from an applicant’s personal statement. CPSQ also allows us to generate a more rounded picture of individual applicants.’

CPSQ has proved particularly useful in helping filter the growing number of applicants to the MSc course, rising from around 220 in 2019 to currently over 350. After an initial selection round, CPSQ is used as a second stage in the application process, Helen and Michelle explain: ‘To be considered for the MSc course, applicants need to demonstrate three key qualities. They must have a real interest in the course, which they can demonstrate by their personal research into the qualification. They must have relevant transferable skills, gained either in education or the workplace. And finally, as the role of physician associate is focused on person-centred care they must have the necessary soft skills, which we assess using CPSQ.’ This makes CPSQ particularly useful when assessing candidates with limited professional experience: ‘An increasing number of recent graduates apply for the MSc, but they have found it difficult – in the current climate – to gain relevant healthcare experience. CPSQ can indicate these applicants’ relevant strengths which – if they go forward to the next stage – can be explored in more depth during the MMIIs.’

Applicants are given a brief introduction to CPSQ before taking the assessment and although results are not automatically shared, they may be used to help explain – in the broadest terms – why an applicant failed to progress through the process. ‘We hope to continue using CPSQ going forward,’ say Helen and Michelle. ‘It provides a valuable early stage assessment of the soft skills and personal attributes needed by the NHS.’