

Students' grievances over MDCAT results continue



Students appearing for MDCAT entry test in Rawalpindi// Photo obtained from Dawn

Aspiring medical students in Pakistan continue to protest over technical errors during the national Medical and Dental College Admission Test (MDCAT) which was computerized for the first time in the country's history.

“My first choice was to pursue MBBS (medicine), but now I am being forced to change my course of study to BDS (dentistry) because my MDCAT score placed me in a lower merit bracket,” said Anfal Sher Khan, a student from Lahore. His grievances are shared among the 194,133 students who took the MDCAT in September 2021 and are dissatisfied over the way it was administered and the results they received. Only over [one third](#) of these students managed to obtain a passing percentage in the MDCAT. This number is significantly lower than previous [years](#) when more than half of the students would usually pass.

In June 2021 the Pakistan Medical Corporation [held](#) a press conference announcing that the upcoming MDCAT would be computer-based instead of in written form and would be held over

a month instead of on a single day. Despite [protests](#) from students and concerns from educators who questioned the country's technical and logistical capacity to hold a computerized examination on such a large scale, the PMC went ahead with its decision.

“The MDCAT was computerized due to the PMC's vision of complete digitalization, including computer-based testing and evaluation, to ultimately improve educational standards in Pakistan,” said Daniyal Malik, PMC assistant manager of evaluation in a zoom interview from his office in the PMC building in Islamabad.

The MDCAT was held from Aug. 30 to Sept. 30 in 25 centers across 22 Pakistani cities and six centers internationally. Students were able to register for the exam online and choose their preferred date and location. A computer algorithm ensured that each student received a different set of questions, and the students were provided with tablets to take the exam, which was based on multiple choice questions (MCQs).

“It was made to be convenient for students as it was a simple basic user interface,” said Malik. However, many students experienced technical difficulties while taking the test.

“My tablet screen was broken, and each answer option was taking too long to select. When I asked for help, the invigilator told me there was nothing that could be done,” said Ayza Naveed, a student who took the exam in Peshawar.

Maryum Ahmed, who took the exam in Lahore, also noted procedural problems. “It's easier to select options on a tablet than shading answer bubbles on paper, but it's only convenient if the tablet works and there are no software glitches.” While she did not experience technical problems, she said, “I was unsure whether I should skip questions or not because a friend of mine skipped questions but wasn't able to return to them and failed her MDCAT.”

Other students also expressed concerns about out-of-syllabus questions, incorrect answer options, and grammatically incorrect question statements. “A couple of my questions were wrong. There was one question in which two out of the four options had the same chemical name, so I didn't know which one to select,” said Aleena Ali, a student from Lahore, who added that many of her friends also encountered such questions. “Some question statements didn't make sense, and many technical words were badly misspelled,” Ahmed said.

Students were also unhappy that each exam had different questions. “There was no set ratio of easy and hard questions. Instead, some candidates got the hardest questions while some got very easy ones,” said Hareem Alvi, a student from Islamabad. Ahmed said, “There's no way that you can judge whether one person has a better aptitude than another person if the test is not the same. If you're testing them on different things, you can't really compare them.”

However, the PMC continues to assert that random question selection is fair “by ensuring that the level of difficulty remains absolutely same for each applicant,” Malik said.

A PMC data analysis [report](#) showed that conducting a computer based MDCAT allowed the organization to collect and evaluate scores. “A comprehensible data set is now available that was not possible with a pen-and-paper examination,” according to the report.

“Such data enables us to reflect on the level and condition of secondary education in each province and acts as a guidance indicator for all departments of PMC to invest and improve accordingly,” Malik explained.

However, students’ discontent only increased once the PMC [announced](#) in October 2021 that only 68,723 out of 194,309 students had passed the exam.

“The results of the MCAT were extremely unfair. Since most of the MCAT syllabus is memory-based rather than concept-based, each year students score near to full marks, but this year most of the students failed even though they were well-prepared,” Alvi said. Many students questioned the computer-based algorithm which checked their exams and released results 30 minutes after each exam. “I got to review my answer sheet and can say with confidence some of the answers recorded in the computer were not the ones I had selected,” Ali said.

In response to this, the PMC set up an independent committee, allowing students to have their exams rechecked but that only added to students’ grievances. “I paid and submitted my rechecking form earlier than a couple of friends but even as they got their results back, I never did,” said Ahmad who added that her emails were also ignored by PMC.

The controversy over students' scores had a nationwide impact.

In Sindh, the provincial government [reduced](#) the passing percentage for admission to medical schools from 65 percent to 50 percent to fill up seats and further stated it will appoint its own provincial medical examination board if “matters could not be sorted out with the PMC.”

Despite the negative feedback, the PMC remains confident in its approach.

“Student enrollment does not seem to relate to this issue,” Malik said, indicating that the MDCAT will continue to be administered by computer. “A huge number of students registered for this exam – exponentially higher than the previous years,” he said. “This unusual spike is a supportive indicator.”

