CIMA students at all levels share their success stories with you, including how they prepared for exams, what they found challenging and their tips for success.
We know the CIMA journey isn’t always plain sailing. There’s a lot to learn and get your head around, and finding time to study for exams can be tricky when you’ve got other commitments like work, family or university.

That’s why we spoke to 12 CIMA students who met the challenge head on and passed the 2015 objective tests and case studies. We hope their inside tips and insight help with your own revision and give you the confidence to succeed.

CONTENTS

1  RUHALY, Management OT
2  KEVIN, Management OT
3  REBECCA, Strategic CS
4  CHRISTOPHER, Management OT
5  SIBONGILE, Management OT
6  RICHARD, Operational CS
7  STYLIANOS, Strategic CS
8  FAYE, Strategic OT
9  ASHLEIGH, Strategic OT
10 JACEK, Management CS
11 EVELINA, Operational CS
12 KRISTIYAN, Operational OT
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a new 2015 assessment?
Relief! Booking the exam was like entering the unknown and with the 70% pass mark it seemed near impossible but since I passed at my first attempt it’s clearly possible!

How did the OT exam compare to what you had expected?
I had expected questions which would all take at least 5-10 minutes each to complete but there was a mix of questions short and long questions and overall it was well balanced.

What was your biggest challenge?
Trying to get through all the questions!

How did you overcome that challenge?
By following the advice many people have given me – attempt all the questions you are comfortable in first to give you that confidence boost then come back to the more challenging questions at the end.

What is your winning formula?
I completed my OT in three steps:
1. Answer all questions that look like ‘quick wins’ that you are confident in and that you could answer quickly (leave all tricky/lengthy questions as incomplete or flag them).
2. Review all incomplete/flagged questions and answer those which you could answer which initially looked time consuming (leave all very tricky or extremely lengthy ones as incomplete/flagged)
3. Finally, review the very tricky or extremely lengthy questions and try to get through them as best as you can.

Key tip only take a few seconds to decide if you will attempt a question or flag it and more importantly, don’t flag every question!

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
I didn’t find the on-screen calculator the best so make sure you bring your own calculator with you!

Can you offer some advice to other students?
Don’t be put off by the 70% pass mark – it’s not as bad as it sounds!
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a new 2015 assessment?
I’m over the moon!

How did the OT exam compare to what you had expected?
I studied with BPP in Liverpool and they have developed an online learning portal which is really targeted to the OTs. The mock exams provided by them were a very similar format to the actual exams. They are also similar in style to the Certificate level computer based tests so should be familiar to many students.

What was your biggest challenge?
I would have to say the time pressure. You have to be able to identify what you are being asked to do, pick out the relevant information from the question and calculate an answer 60 times in 90 minutes.

How did you overcome that challenge?
Preparation is key – practise, practise, practise! Once you are familiar with how questions are phrased and the potential pitfalls you become a lot quicker and more confident. Also, don’t think of it as 90 seconds per question as some will take you longer than others. Break it into chunks – say 20 questions every 30 minutes so you can assess if you are on track.

What is your winning formula?
The new exam format means that the whole of the syllabus can be examined so question spotters will have to approach this in a different way. Rather than learning to blindly follow a process you need to understand the accounting logic behind the process. Once you start to think like a management accountant no question should be able to trip you up.

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
It’s a silly thing, but you only get told if you have provisionally passed or failed after the exam. You get your official pass/fail two days later on the CIMA website, and you are not told your percentage mark at any point. For the numerically minded it can be a bit of an anti-climax!

Can you offer some advice to other students?
You will never feel 100% ready – you’ve done the work so go for it!
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a case study exam?
It feels amazing, especially for it to be my last CIMA exam, it's a great way to round off the past three years of studying.

How did the case study exam compare to what you had expected?
I can't really say what I was expecting, because the format seemed so different from what I’d heard T4 to be like previously from colleagues and friends, I kept pretty open minded to what the format would be like. I did however like the format on computer and how it replicated an every-day work environment.

How did you prepare for the exam and which resources did you find most helpful?
Most of my studying for the exam was done during classroom time, as my tuition provider had drafted some really useful practice questions based around the case study. Question practice is what I've always found most useful, particularly a couple of weeks leading up to the exam, to get a good feeling of what’s expected from a well-rounded answer. I found the advice articles available on CIMAcconect useful, as they gave a good insight to how the examiner would test us, and the practise exam format available from Pearson Vue was very useful too, to get used to the software.

What was your biggest challenge and how did you overcome it?
Getting the balance between working full time and studying, not so much of a juggle for the final case study exam as the majority of my studying was done in the classroom, but travelling to Leeds from Hull every Saturday after five days of working was quite draining.
I made a study planner right at the start of tuition which I hung in my kitchen so I could see if I was achieving what I’d set myself to do. My employer is also very understanding when it comes to studying and offer paid study leave nearer the exam. Lots of sleep was helpful too!

What is your winning formula?
I always try to start (and stick to) a study plan as early on as possible, I think it’s much easier to make the links between the three subjects (Finance, Performance and Enterprise) later on in the studying, when completing past exam questions, if the basic understanding is there.
I recommend visual aids for revision, mind maps, images and silly acronyms really help to implant the knowledge in my head. The sillier the better as I’m more likely to remember them!

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
Leading up to the exam, there seemed quite a bit of uncertainty around how many marks were available for the whole exam, and not knowing the marks allocated to each requirement within each of the three questions made it more difficult on where to prioritise my time. I understand why the new syllabus might cause changes in the marking guide, but it was quite unnerving not having a solid understanding of this before sitting the exam.

Can you offer some advice to other students?
Question practice is definitely key. It’s reiterated so often, by tutors, past students, current students, in CIMA articles etc, but I do think it really is the best way to be as prepared as possible, and feel comfortable with the format and language used.

What’s your next step?
I’m aiming to complete my experience log in the next couple of months, and keep working on developing my skills at work to progress further within the company and propel myself further in my career.
CHRISTOPHER

“The new assessment is a big improvement, particularly for those working full time.”

How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a new 2015 assessment?
Pretty good, changing the syllabus mid-study was a little worrying at first, but the differences were all well communicated and I think the new assessment method is a big improvement, particularly for those working full time.

How did the OT exam compare to what you had expected?
I did a fair bit of OT practice before the exam, and the questions were formatted fairly similarly, so there were no real shocks.

What was your biggest challenge?
Timekeeping. Now that the pass mark is 70% pacing yourself and ensuring you finish is absolutely vital.

How did you overcome that challenge?
Lots of practice! It only takes a tiny bit of exam day stress to throw off your timekeeping, which could result in not finishing and dropping easy marks at the end.

What is your winning formula?
Work out how long the material will take to learn, then book the exam straight away so you have to keep on track. Sleep well and eat properly. Factor in times to do something more enjoyable while revising, (I cycle, or to the gym to break things up). If possible take a day or two off leading up to the exam to get your mind completely immersed in the module.

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
The location of the ‘nth root’ button on a TI-30XS calculator!
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a new 2015 assessment?
It feels great, I feel relieved to have had the courage to take my exam this early.

How did the OT exam compare to what you had expected?
It was not as bad as I had anticipated.

What was your biggest challenge?
Time management; I never used to finish my paper based exams. I almost lost track of time the first 40 minutes or so but when I realised this I pushed very hard.

How did you overcome that challenge?
I realised when I was taking my P2 practice exams that all the questions weigh the same so my strategy was not to waste time on long complicated questions. I will attempt all questions but when the time finishes I will move on to the next question.

What is your winning formula?
I studied very hard; did lots of OT questions when I was practicing. I even had to look for other sources of P2 OT questions (e.g. Astranti) because I felt the CIMA practice questions and Pearson Vue were not enough.

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
Not really, though I was relieved that the examiner would give us a hint as to where we needed to give more than one answer.

Can you offer some advice to other students?
There are no short cuts with CIMA; do lots of practice questions and don’t be intimidated about the changes.
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a case study exam?

It was hard work not knowing exactly what to expect from the exam, but it’s now really good to have it out of the way. It’s amazing to think that I managed to get the highest mark in this exam.

How did the case study exam compare to what you had expected?

In general, it was in line with my expectations. The exam wasn’t just asking me to repeat definitions and facts that I had memorised, which is a structure used by many exams. It was more about testing that I really understood the context behind different parts of the syllabus, and that I was able to communicate these concepts clearly and concisely. I hesitate to say this, but I actually quite enjoyed the format of this exam!

The main thing that surprised me in the exam was how I was expecting the questions to relate more closely to the pre-seen material. Most of the questions were quite general and could be applied to any company. The challenge was then working out how this should be applied in the context of the bottled water company that we were looking at.

How did you prepare for the exam and which resources did you find most helpful?

I think there are two key skills that the case study exams are testing. One is whether you really understand the topics in the syllabus (not just memorising the definition, but understanding what it means in real life). The second is whether you are able to take a blank piece of paper (or in this case, blank computer screen), and write something that is clear and insightful – all under a real time pressure.

Personally, I find the second of these much easier than the first. A large part of my role at work is writing narrative about financial rules and results for senior management. So it needs to be clear, it needs to be insightful, and needs to be something that can be easily understood by a non-specialist. As a result, I’ve had lots of practice at writing stuff down clearly.

The harder part for me is remembering every part of the syllabus, and being able to recall all that information straight away. So when studying for the exam, I focused on going through my study notes, ensuring that I knew and understood what they contained. I didn’t spend too much time memorising the exact definitions, as I knew that the answers I wrote were supposed to be targeted at someone with no formal finance qualification.

What was your biggest challenge and how did you overcome it?

As I’ve identified above, the greatest challenge for me was the volume of syllabus areas that I needed to remember.

It may seem an obvious answer, but I focused most of my study time on the bits I found hardest. So this meant going back through study notes, and picking out the areas that I needed to do some more work on.

I certainly found that going through the course in this way, I learnt a lot more about the exams that I had previously sat. When I went through them the first time, it was about studying to pass the exam. With the case study, I found that I had to actually understand the course content. And that took a bit of work!

What is your winning formula?

I wouldn’t say that I’ve got a ‘winning formula’. I certainly think it’s important not to let studying completely take over your life in the weeks leading up to the exam. Spend time with your family as well. And don’t let studying get in the way of other things you enjoy – I volunteer as a scout leader, and at the same time as studying for the Operational Case Study I kept myself busy by organising a day trip to London for 40 10-14 year old scouts. Whilst it may seem a little crazy to be doing so much at once, I found this to be a very welcome break from studying.

Can you offer some advice to other students?

Read the past exams, see what the examiner is looking for. I think that at the operational case study level, they are mainly looking for clarity of communication – rather than the technical intricacies of the syllabus content.
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a case study exam?
The fact that I completed my CIMA studies and exams with such an achievement is emotional by definition. On top of that, I felt extra excited receiving the results and that I won the prize for the second position in the world in this first CIMA strategic case study sitting. This is not just a prize for me, it is a confirmation that real life experience is as important as studies and it is an incentive for me to continue learning and apply this knowledge to broaden my experiences.

How did the case study exam compare to what you had expected?
The case study was very different to what I had seen from the previous paper based version (T4). On the other hand, it was so close to a real life example that my experience helped me a lot to tackle it using the correct approach.

How did you prepare for the exam and which resources did you find most helpful?
I was self-studying using multiple resources from online material, the official syllabus and a lot of practice using past papers. I found the latter the best source of what is required at the strategic level from the perspective of the assessors.

Did you use a tuition provider?
No, I didn’t.

What was your biggest challenge and how did you overcome it?
My biggest challenge was to understand what is really expected in this new type of assessment as it was not clear and all the online instructions I had found seemed to be guesses as well. I used the guidance published by CIMA and I tried to familiarise myself as much as possible with that.

What is your winning formula?
Make sure you know the basics (theory), familiarise yourself with the company in the case study finding a similar company in real life and put yourself in the shoes of the managers in such a company asking yourself “What would this manager do if he had this challenge in real life?”

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
No!

Can you offer some advice to other students?
This new type of exam is very much focused on real life examples. Theory is as important as experience. Put yourself in the shoes of the managers who would actually work in the company in discussion and make sure you empathise and you have built a holistic understanding of the challenges they may face before answering any of the questions.

What’s your next step?
I am a person who believes in continuous learning and development as well as building professional experience. Most probably I will pursue an additional qualification in another field that would complement my knowledge.
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a new 2015 assessment?
A relief! Not knowing the process and not having any past papers to refer to changes the way you have to revise. Also the rise in pass mark instils some fear, so I am very glad to have passed!

What study method/provider did you use and was it/were they helpful?
I went to classes at Kaplan Manchester tuition. I chose not to do the revision or exam days. As I did all three strategic level at the same time I did F3 day release, E3 at weekends and P3 of an evening. I felt like I spent more time in college than at home, but it worked for me.

How did the OT exam compare to what you had expected?
They were a lot harder than I originally expected. I came to CIMA through the certificate level so I expected something similar, but they were much harder. With sitting operational and management level on the old syllabus, I got used to the 50% pass rate and a different level of knowledge required, it was a quick change of thinking that I wasn’t completely ready for. I think there is a risk of complacency when there are options in front of you, but this had to be removed immediately to pass!

What was your biggest challenge and how did you overcome it?
Sitting all three at the same time. I like to give myself a challenge as I have all the way through CIMA. I have always sat three papers at the same time however when tutors and others that usually help you are new to the syllabus as well, your confidence drops slightly.

Unfortunately there was no magic answer. I just needed to keep my confidence levels up and know that I would get through it just as I had the other levels. Knowing that if I passed these exams before May I could be exam qualified by summer, really spurred me on.

What is your winning formula?
When you have the option of booking them for any date, you run the risk of putting them off. This wasn’t possible with the old syllabus so you really need to believe you can pass it. For me, I decided to book them as soon as I booked my course, that way I had a date to work towards. Along with that, I made sure to read the full text, this included the expandable areas, and it really gave me a true understanding of the modules. You need an all-round knowledge to pass the objective tests, not just good knowledge of certain areas.

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
The question style. I felt that the revision question bank given didn’t truly reflect what was to come. For example, picking three out of five is a lot easier than picking “all that apply”, I don’t feel we practiced that style that often.

Can you offer some advice to other students?
Book the exams as soon as you know you want to sit them. If you have a course give yourself two weeks at the end and book it for then, it really gives you something to work towards and motivation. Also, don’t be afraid to go at your own pace. Whether that is a whole level in one sitting or one exam every three months, don’t be put off by the people around you, you know your capabilities.
Finally, they can be passed!! Truthfully, I was quite pessimistic when the syllabus change came in but it’s enabled me to sit all of the professional level exams this year and free up my summer!
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a new 2015 assessment?
A bit surreal. I actually booked the exam the first day possible and my exam day was the first Saturday available. I was using it as a familiarisation exam... basically just wanted to see what it was like. Having sat E3 three times under the old system and gained 48%, 45% and 41% I was looking forward to a fresh approach and I was also looking forward to the feedback. Having been so close in previous attempts I wanted to know where my downfall was. I really didn’t expect to pass.

How did the OT exam compare to what you had expected?
To be honest, the questions were easier than what I had previously attempted using various exam practice kits. I was disappointed with the feedback given. I was expecting marks or percentages beside each of the syllabus areas but just received 'Proficient' or 'Not Proficient'. However, having reflected on the feedback, it makes no difference whether marks are there or not. You either know it or you don’t but it would have been nice for CIMA to have made that clear somehow.

What was your biggest challenge?
Keeping my nerves under control. Letting my nerves get to me is probably why I had been unsuccessful previously.

How did you overcome that challenge?
What helped relax me was that I knew that if I wasn’t successful, I could book the re-sit straight away. Waiting several weeks for the results and then another few weeks to book the re-sit and then more weeks for the actual resit is nonsense and I am delighted with the new format that CIMA have implemented.

What is your winning formula?
Practise, practise, practise as many questions as possible. Even make up some of your own to try throughout your revision period.

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
To put on an extra layer... I was a bit cold!

Can you offer some advice to other students?
Give the exam a try. If you pass... great. If you don’t you will know what areas you are not proficient in and can focus your attention on those areas specifically.
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a case study exam?

I am excited but also surprised since it is hard to predict the result on open-ended questions which often involve some business judgment.

How did the case study exam compare to what you had expected?

Firstly, despite high expectations, the exam was far more interesting than I expected. I had a feeling I was working on real business cases. What is interesting, when I told my friend about the questions in details, he was so excited that he decided to enroll for the next CIMA exams. The level of difficulty was more predictable – it was quite similar to the practice exam.

How did you prepare for the exam and which resources did you find most helpful?

I was using CIMA Official Exam Practice Kit published by Kaplan and I was satisfied with this material. It is logically written, concise and contains many relevant examples thereby allowing effective learning. I also tried to read more widely around key subjects with the focus on the industry from the pre-seen material. I used different publicly available industry reports and well-known business publications such as Financial Times and Harvard Business Review. I also took two practice exams delivered by Pearson VUE which really helped me to identify my weaknesses and practise time management. Finally, I revised part of the books based on the weaknesses identified in practice exams.

What is your biggest challenge and how did you overcome it?

The biggest challenge was to organise and manage time to prepare for the ‘triple exam’ in one sitting. I have made an ambitious study plan (“stretch target” in CIMA terminology). I divided work into five separate phases with specific deadlines for each. First three stages involved reading E2, P2 and F2 books, respectively. By the way, I found this sequence helpful as it was much easier to start with the most pleasant book (for me) and become optimistic before studying harder parts of the material. In the next step I took two practice exams delivered by Pearson VUE in order to identify my weaknesses and practise time management. Finally, I revised part of the books based on the weaknesses identified in practice exams.

What is your winning formula?

WINNING FORMULA = STUDY PLAN + IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS PLAN. Unfortunately, it seems that there are no shortcuts. I strongly believe that organisng appropriate amount of time is the most important success factor.

Can you offer some advice to other students?

Prepare a reasonable and feasible study plan and stick to it. Try to think about practical application of business models as it would be far easier to fully understand and apply the theory.
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a case study exam and be a global prizewinner?
Winning a global prize was a very unexpected and pleasant surprise for me! I felt that my effort while studying for this exam was appreciated. I also received congratulations from several Senior Leaders in Finance at work which also felt as a great achievement.

How did the case study exam compare to what you had expected?
I did several trial exams before the real exam and practised a lot, therefore the format of questions in the real exam was as expected. Before the exam I learnt how to deal with the time pressure, so I managed to accomplish all tasks on time. I was also well familiar with the pre-seen material about the company which was very helpful. However, I need to admit that answering questions in the online environment and in the meantime taking notes on the notepad was quite unusual.

How did you prepare for the exam and which resources did you find most helpful?
I used online lectures and work books provided by the tuition provider. I followed a so-called ‘Achievement Ladder’ where step by step students acquire new skills and knowledge but also accumulate the knowledge obtained from the previous lectures. I spent quite some time analysing the pre-seen material about the company in order to become familiar with the corporate situation. What I found very useful was trial exams offered by my tuition provider. This gave me a lot of practicing experience and drew attention to the knowledge gaps which have to be filled in. In addition to this I had a great tutor online who was always very motivating and encouraging!

Did you use a tuition provider?
I studied with the tuition provider offered by my Employer, which is BPP.

What was your biggest challenge and how did you overcome it?
My biggest challenge in the operational case study preparation was F1 course content since I received an exemption from that exam. However I still decided to study for F1 exam in order to make sure that I have the required knowledge for the case study. This meant I had to study for F1 and the operational case study simultaneously. I tried to cover the main topics of F1 and understand the accounting treatment, therefore I followed the BPP online lectures and also the operational case study workbook was very useful including many practice examples.

What is your winning formula?
Have a clear study plan and study frequently in order to build up knowledge and skills. This has to be done focusing on CIMA exam format and suggested ways of answering exam questions.

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
I do not recall any specific surprises, since I read about the flow of the case study exam in CIMA articles in advance.

Can you offer some advice to other students?
My main advice for the students would be to spend time on CIMA frequently while ahead of exams not trying to put all learning in the last week before the exam. It is essential to do revision of the materials covered and practice questions a lot.

What’s your next step?
Currently I am studying for the management level exams. I need to adapt to the new ways of studying and new syllabus introduced by CIMA. After winning this global prize I need to keep up with the risen expectations about my study performance as well!
How does it feel to be one of the first students to pass a new 2015 assessment?
It feels good because it was my first CIMA examination. People shouldn’t worry too much about it, because the questions are pretty straightforward and in most of them the answer’s in front of you.

How did the OT exam compare to what you had expected?
It was exactly what I expected. I was well prepared, so the only thing that surprised me was the Pearson VUE scratch “paper”. I lost a lot of time trying to scratch it... New people should be aware of that and plan their time and font accordingly.

What was your biggest challenge?
Well, it was definitely a challenge that this was my first examination, so I wasn’t sure what to expect. When I got exempted from the Certificate level, I said to myself that I need to read those textbooks too, to avoid any unpleasant surprises in the process. I am glad that I did. There were definitely things that I needed to learn about.

How did you overcome that challenge?
I never leave things to faith. I need to be well prepared for every situation that may occur. This way, I am not only rarely being surprised, but also performing well.

What is your winning formula?
Learn ➔ Practise ➔ Learn from the mistakes ➔ Practise ➔ Practise ➔ Pass the exam

Is there any one thing you wished you’d have known before entering the exam room (apart from the answers?)
The scratch paper. It is a pain!

Can you offer some advice to other students?
If you practise a lot of mock exams at home, you will feel the same relaxed way on the examination. Clear eyes, full hearts, can’t lose!
For more stories and advice from CIMA students, or to schedule your next exam, visit www.cimaglobal.com/successstories today.