

#ThinkAheadMed

An insider's guide for medical students –
how to get a head start in your career

BMA

Northern Ireland



British Medical Association
bma.org.uk

Many medical students reach their final year and begin to ask questions about what career path to take. “Do I want to do surgery? Medicine? General practice? Academia? How do I enter core and specialty training? What do I need to know to get the best out of exams and potential job interviews?”

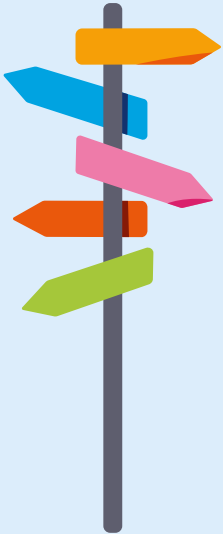
No matter the path you choose to pursue, entry into many specialties is becoming increasingly competitive and often requires evidence of ‘commitment’ to that specialty from medical school. In some cases, supplementary evidence is also asked for in your CV or application, such as teaching and leadership experience. Unfortunately, many medical students only become aware of such requirements after they have graduated. There is a wealth of opportunities both inside and outside of medical school that can help enhance your future job prospects while you study for your medical degree.

In response to this, BMA’s Northern Ireland medical students committee (NIMSC) has compiled the ‘Think Ahead Med’ resource: a booklet and campaign aimed at highlighting key information and opportunities both inside and outside the medical school environment to help you reach your career potential. Everything from; which year group exams hold the most weighting to applying to F1; from what extra-curricular activities can offer leadership experience; to getting involved in societies, research and teaching, to name a few.

Each sub section is colour-coded by year to help guide you as to when in your degree pathway you should be looking at those opportunities to help maximise your CV for your future job.

We hope to signpost you to a broad list of opportunities which you can access now, while you are at medical school, so that you can step into your career with a head start.

BMA’s Northern Ireland medical students committee (NIMSC).



Contents

- This booklet is separated into two parts: '**Inside medical school**' and '**Outside medical school**'.
- Each part is separated into subsections that are colour-coded by year group to make it easy to identify when you should become aware of them during your studies.

All years	Second year	Third and fourth year	Third to final year	Fourth and final year
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- *Any subsection with a * relates only to QUB medical school.*

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PART ONE

Inside medical school



Think Ahead: exams and placements

1. Exam weightings ●

What is it? The amount a year group exam goes towards your application to the foundation programme when you graduate.

How can it help you? It highlights how important each year group exam is.

- First year is worth approximately 10.1%
- Second year is worth approximately 17.7%
- Third year is worth approximately 33.2%
- Fourth year is worth approximately 39%

In what year does it become important? Third and fourth year as the weighting becomes more significant towards your foundation programme application.

Top tip: Be mindful that the above percentages may change as the result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

More resources: [gmc-uk.org](https://www.gmc-uk.org)

2. Your EPM ●

What is it? Your EPM (educational performance measure) is a scoring system that goes towards your foundation programme application that you make in your final year. It is comprised of three elements:

- Your medical school performance (see ‘Your decile’)
- Additional degrees. These have a maximum of five points, for example: a third-class honours degree would provide one point, whilst a PhD would provide five points
- Publications. These have a maximum of two points, with at least one point per-publication.

How can it help you? It is worth up to 50 points out of a total foundation programme application score of 100.

In what year does it become important? Summer of fourth year right through to the foundation programme application in final year. BUT! It is worth being aware of it in all years so you can make best use of time throughout medical school to work towards it.

Top tip: Graduating from 2023 onwards? Intercollegiate degrees will not count towards your EPM. However, they will still count towards specialty training (also see ‘Intercalation’ on page six).

More resources: [foundationprogramme.nhs.uk](https://www.foundationprogramme.nhs.uk)

3. Your decile ●

What is it? Your decile measures your performance within medical school and ranks your position within your academic year. It is based on your exam marks.

How can it help you? It enables your EPM score to be calculated. The top 10% in your year will score a decile of 43 points, the next 10% will score 42 points, down to the bottom decile who will score 34.

In what year does it become important? All years.

Top tip: Third and fourth year counts the most towards your decile. However, it helps to be aware of your decile throughout medical school.

More resources: foundationprogramme.nhs.uk

4. The SJT ●

What is it? The SJT (situational judgement test) is taken in the final year of your medical degree and consists of 70 questions to be completed in two hours and 20 minutes.

How can it help you? It is worth up to 50 points out of the total foundation programme application score of 100.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Fourth and fifth year.

Top tip: It is not a test of your medical knowledge but rather a test of how well you would react in certain situations. There is a common misconception that you cannot prepare for this exam, but you can and should.

More resources:

- Search for ‘Preparing for the SJT’ on the BMA website bma.org.uk
- foundationprogramme.nhs.uk

5. Clinical placements ●

What is it? When a medical student is present in a real-life work environment that provides healthcare or related services to patients. Placements can take place in primary, secondary or community healthcare or social care settings.

How can it help you? Gain experience in a specialty you are interested in.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Third to final year.

Top tip: If you know the subject of your teaching session the next day in the hospital, read the topic in the recommended textbook the night before. The teaching session will be a test of your active recall which is easy revision for exams.

More resources:

- gmc-uk.org
- qub.ac.uk/schools/mdbs/
- Careers sections of Northern Ireland health trust websites.

6. SSCs ●

What is it? Student selected components (SCCs) offer experiences to medical students outside the core curriculum.

How can it help you? It's a chance to experience more specialties and show commitment to a specialty you are interested in.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Most important from third year onwards, but all years should be aware of it.

Top tip: Choose an SSC you have an interest in that you won't get the chance to experience in the standard medical curriculum.

More resources: healthcareers.nhs.uk

Think Ahead: other medical school options

1. Intercalation* ●

What is it? Intercalation is an additional year of study on top of your medical degree programme.

How can it help you? It is an opportunity to explore new subjects, to enhance existing skills and knowledge, or to prepare for your chosen career path.

In what year does it become important and for how long? There is a natural break between second and third year which is an ideal time to intercalate.

Top tip: Intercalated degrees can be taken at most UK universities. It is possible to take an intercalated degree at another academic institution.

More resources:

- Search for 'Intercalated degrees' on the BMA website bma.org.uk
- qub.ac.uk/schools/mdbs/

2. Elective destination ●

What is it? A placement undertaken as part of a medical degree. The content and setting of the placement are largely decided by the student undertaking it, with some students choosing to spend it in a different country.

How can it help you? A medical elective spent abroad is your chance to hone clinical skills in a different/challenging hospital setting and see how sociocultural factors impact care.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Third and fourth year; the timing of the elective and how long it lasts depends on your medical school, but they are normally for six-12 weeks.

Top tip: Start thinking early on in your medical degree about electives as it counts towards specialty training.

More resources:

- Search for 'Electives' on the BMA website bma.org.uk
- [TEN \(The Electives Network\)](#) is a useful tool for researching potential hospitals and elective destinations.

3. Medical societies ●

What is it? A group of medical students who share an interest in a specific area and a forum to learn about new research, events and developments in that field.

How can it help you? Shows commitment to a specialty and gives you a taste of what specialties are like even before clinical placements.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: Join as many societies as you can in first year as it is a great way to make friends as you start your medical degree.

More resources:

- ums.ac.uk
- qubsu.org

4. E-portfolio* ●

What is it? A collection of documents providing evidence of learning, achievements, and personal and professional development. It is a compulsory element of a QUB medical degree.

How can it help you? It allows you to track and show evidence of your personal and professional development, allowing you to engage in reflective learning and critical thinking. Students are

encouraged to upload evidence of additional achievements. The same portfolio system is used by foundation year doctors and allows your mentors to track your progress and development in key skills.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: Set a monthly reminder on your phone for your e-portfolio to help you chip away at it in a timely fashion.

More resources:

- new-learning.bmj.com
- www.healthcareers.nhs.uk

5. Summer studentships* ●

What is it? A six to eight-week summer research project offered by QUB's School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical sciences' Research Centre. Areas of research include experimental medicine, cancer research, medical education, public health, biomedical sciences. Other universities may offer summer studentships too.

How can it help you? It will improve your research skills and there is an opportunity to gain a publication from the research you conduct. You could potentially present your findings at national and international conferences.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All year groups.

Top tip: As well as projects funded by QUB's School of Medicine, externally funded summer studentships from other organisations may also be available.

More resources:

- qub.ac.uk/schools/mdbs/
- wellcome.org

6. Degree Plus programme* ●

What is it? Designed by QUB to allow students to gain formal recognition for their engagement in extra-circular activities throughout their degree.

How can it help you? It can help enhance your employability. Additionally, activities that count towards your Degree Plus application give you the opportunity to meet new people, develop new friendships and provide a rounded approach to medical school.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Apply at any stage of medical school.

Top tip: Fill in your application as early as you can.

More resources: www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/degreeplus/

PART TWO

Outside medical school



Think Ahead: self-development

1. Podcasts ●

What are they? Audio programmes about any topic imaginable, including practising medicine, studying medicine and life as a medical student.

How can it help you? Listening to podcasts keeps you at the cutting edge of medical developments, gives an insight into a range of medical specialties and develops an understanding of the working lives of doctors. Other helpful podcasts can provide tips on getting through medical school and personal wellbeing.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: Get into a routine of finding time to listen to podcasts, such as during exercise or when travelling to classes/placement.

More resources: There are a huge amount of podcasts available, here are a few favourites of NIMSC:

- Sharp Scratch – this series from BMJ Students brings different panellists together to talk about things that medical school doesn't teach students.
- QUB GP Society's Podcast – a great learning resource for conditions commonly found in primary care.

- This Podcast Will Kill You – A fun and easy to understand look at different diseases.
- Everyday Emergencies – True stories of humanitarian crises across the globe and what it is like to provide medical care in these environments.
- The Zero to Finals Medical Revision Podcast.

2. Student conferences ●

What are they? Conferences aimed at medical students and foundation doctors considering a career in a particular specialty.

How can it help you? Shows commitment to specialty and is an opportunity to learn more about a specialty you are interested in. They are a great chance to network and meet new people.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: Attendance at conferences can be pricey, but they often offer discounted fees for students. Ask if you can volunteer at a conference in exchange for free entry. Covid means most conferences are now online and cheaper or free to attend.

More resources:

- Keep an eye on the BMA website for conferences
- Most Royal Colleges run conferences (see 'Royal Colleges or professional associations' on page 16).

3. Webinars ●

What is it? Webinars, webcasts and web meetings or conferencing are useful tools for online learning, events and networking.

How can it help you? Can provide information on how to apply to a specialty and help you gain specific knowledge on topics related to that specialty. Attendance shows commitment to specialty and CPD (continuing professional development). See 'E-portfolio' on page seven.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All year groups.

Top tip: Keep an eye on the BMA website and social media for updates on latest courses. #MedStudentTwitter is a great hashtag to follow for useful medical student events.

More resources:

- bma.org.uk
- new-learning.bmj.com

4. Shadowing ●

What is it? Observing another doctor or healthcare professional.

How can it help you? Allows you to see what that job involves and ask any questions.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Third year onwards.

Top tip: If you have an interest in a particular area of medicine, try to get some shadowing experience in that field. Be proactive and contact medics in that specialty. There is also a 'taster week' in F2 for different specialties.

More resources: healthcareers.nhs.uk

5. Teaching experience ●

What is it? Teaching can be an extremely gratifying experience and has become a key aspect to being a good doctor. You may even find you might consider a career in medical education.

How can it help you? Provides evidence for training competencies. Helps develop strong communication and leadership skills early. Teaching can be anything from peer-to-peer support, to hosting small workshops and tutorials. Many medical student societies run educational events and need students

to help run them, such as BMA Northern Ireland's year group revision days.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Third year onwards.

Top tip: The important part of teaching is to enjoy it and make the most of it. Always get feedback.

More resources: <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/outputs/how-gain-teaching-experience>

6. Green Cards ●

What is it? An award for an exceptionally good performance in OSCEs (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations). Areas of recognition include: highly competent in the skill being assessed; fluency in performing the skill; demonstrates concern, respect and empathy towards the simulated patient.

How can it help you? Enhances your CV.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: Speak to fellow students who did well in OSCEs and ask for advice.

More resources: Search for 'OSCE' on the BMA website bma.org.uk

7. Prizes ●

What are they? Prizes are useful additions to your CV, demonstrating both a commitment to a particular career and an achievement of excellence. Just being short-listed for a prize will still be a CV boost.

How can it help you? They can have monetary value, can be associated with scholarships, and can result in publications. Some prizes may consist of writing an essay or submitting a piece of work from your research.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All year groups should be aware of them.

Top tip: Enter as many of them as you can as your chances of winning one can be higher than you think due to generally low numbers of applicants/entrants.

More resources: rsm.ac.uk/prizes-and-awards/prizes-for-students/

8. Extracurricular Courses ●

What is it? There will be numerous courses hosted by your university, student societies or external organisations throughout your time at medical school.

How can it help you? They can be good opportunities to network, learn and show an interest in specialties. Most events will supply you with a certificate as proof of attendance.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All year groups.

Top tip: With Covid-19, many of these events are now hosted online, which can make international events easier to attend.

More resources: Check out your university information channels, medical societies, and BMA website/social media for course opportunities.

9. Surgical logbooks ●

What is it? A record of all your relevant surgical experience. If you start doing this while you are at medical school, this will give you an opportunity to become familiar with (and get in the habit of) inputting the information regularly and start building a useful collection of data and experience for your career.

How can it help you? It can show your commitment to surgery.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Fourth and final year.

Top tip: You should ensure the logbook is up to date. It can be useful for future applications to surgical training.

More resources: [asit.org](https://www.asit.org)

10. Summer Schools ●

What is it? A short intense week (or more) that provides a taste of a specialty. Career information is provided by specialty doctors with advice on how to apply to that specialty and it's a chance to network with peers.

How can it help you? Gives you an insight into what a career in a specialty is really like. Summer schools can be helpful if you have not gained a placement in a specialty you are interested in. Advice and tips on how to improve your application may be provided and it shows commitment to specialty.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: Keep a look out for advertisements for them on social media platforms.

More resources: Check out Royal College websites for info on summer schools.

11. Leadership demonstration ●

What is it? Leadership is the process of motivating and guiding others towards the achievement of a common goal.

How can it help you? Leadership is a critical skill in medicine, doctors play a vital role in the management of others we are often expected to be the leaders within clinical teams.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years, so it is never too early or too late to start working on your leadership skills.

Top tip: There will be a variety of opportunities to show and develop this throughout medical school and you may have already been doing it prior to medical school. Leadership can be shown through a part time job, your hobby, a sport you play and/or help coach, or a society you are involved with. Many of these activities will have transferrable skills. It all depends on how you sell it!

More resources:

- fmlm.ac.uk
- thehealthcareleadership.academy

12. Teamwork demonstration ●

What is it? Part of good medical practice is being able to work effectively with your medical, nursing and allied health professional colleagues to ensure the highest level of care and safety of patients and support one another through your careers.

How can it help you? Having good teamwork skills means that you can utilise your colleagues' skills to help make your work as a doctor much easier. Those who can effectively work in a team will also have a more pleasant work environment.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: You can demonstrate teamwork skills through societies, sports clubs, or part time jobs – not all your experiences need to be from medicine.

More resources: Get involved with medical student societies or BMA's Northern Ireland medical students committee (NIMSC). Search for 'NIMSC' on the BMA website bma.org.uk

Think Ahead: external organisations

1. BMA membership and committee involvement ●

What is it? The BMA is the biggest union and professional body for all doctors and medical students in the UK.

How can it help you? Being a BMA member gains you access to support and guidance throughout your studies as a medical student and your career in medicine.

Being actively involved in a BMA committee – such as NIMSC – develops advocacy and leadership skills as committees represent the interests of doctors and medical students to relevant stakeholders such as employers, government and universities.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: If you want to find out more about the work of BMA committees and experience the process before deciding to stand as an elected representative, you can attend a meeting as a visitor – <https://www.bma.org.uk/what-we-do/committees/committee-information/committee-visitors-scheme>

More resources: Search for 'NIMSC' on the BMA website bma.org.uk

2. Affiliation with a Royal College or professional association ●

What is it? Affiliation with a particular Royal College or professional association can give you access to a wide range of benefits and opportunities throughout your career journey in a particular specialty.

How can it help you? They outline what they look for in candidates applying to the particular specialty they represent; this gives you an idea of what you can do now to become a competitive applicant in that specialty.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: Student membership of Royal Colleges and professional bodies is usually free or cheaper than full membership. Being a member also shows commitment to specialty.

More resources: Check out any of the Royal College websites.

Think Ahead: research

1. QI/audit ●

What is it? Quality improvement (QI) projects and audits are vital aspects of clinical governance and continual service improvement in medicine. QI aims to improve the patient experience. An audit assesses if a certain aspect of a healthcare is attaining a recognised standard.

How can it help you? Audits are becoming increasingly important to demonstrate interest in quality improvement and high standard of healthcare. They can sometimes result in an opportunity to officially publish your results (see 'Publications'). It can empower students to take part in academic projects, research and it helps you to form links with supervising doctors.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Third year and fourth year.

Top tip: If you are unsure how to conduct an audit on your own, it is a good idea to ask around on placement to see which doctors are conducting research and whether you can lend a hand.

More resources: healthcareers.nhs.uk

2. Publications ●

What is it? Publications can be research papers, abstracts, audits, case reports, letters or opinion pieces that are published in journals.

How can it help you? Will boost your CV, strengthen your application for specialty training, develop your research skills, allows you to explore in-depth a topic that you are interested in.

In what year does it become important and for how long? All years.

Top tip: It can take up to a year to get a research piece published so the earlier you do one, the better! Keep an eye out for research opportunities that are advertised by your university or during your placement.

More resources:

- bmj.com
- healthcareers.nhs.uk

3. Case reports and posters ●

What is it? Case reports and posters are usually surprisingly easy to carry out and look excellent on a CV so are worth pursuing.

- **Case reports:** If you come across an interesting patient on a placement, you can write up their case as a 'case report'. It is a way to place the case in a clinical context and to emphasise the importance or relevance of the case as something everyone can learn from.
- **Posters:** Scientific posters are a great way of presenting information. Posters can be used to present and summarise information about a particular disease and its management, any audits undertaken and quality improvement information. Posters aim to convey information using tables, graphs, pictures and concise paragraphs of information. Most scientific conferences use posters as their preferred format for presenting information.

How can it help you? Case reports or posters can help bring about beneficial change within clinical practice. They can lead to presentation opportunities at conferences, to prizes or publications. This all enhances applications to core-trainee posts in the future.

In what year does it become important and for how long? Case reports and posters are easier to carry out in clinical years (mainly third to fifth year) due to exposure to the wards.

Top tip: Be sure to ask a member of the team on the ward if they know of any interesting cases or quality improvement work that you could use for a case report or poster. It is more than likely that there is a project ongoing that the team would love an extra pair of hands for. There are also many opportunities throughout the year to present your work through conferences run by QUB or UU societies e.g. Scrubs.

More resources:

- guides.nyu.edu/posters
- www.studentdoctor.net/
- bmj.com
- medibuddy.co.uk/

Other helpful resources:

BMA tips for choosing your medical specialty

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/studying-medicine/guide-to-medical-specialties/tips-for-choosing-your-medical-specialty>

BMA specialty explorer

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/career-progression/training/specialty-explorer>

BMJ on Examination exam support and guidance for all members

<https://www.bmj.com/company/bmj-resource-centre/bmj-onexamination-resources/bmj-onexamination/>

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