

#ThinkAheadMed

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

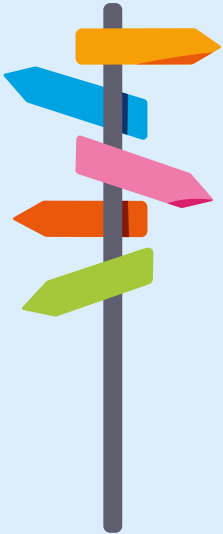
BMA

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 job interviews?”**



No matter which 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. However, there is a wealth of opportunities you can avail of that can help enhance your future job prospects all while you study for your medical degree.

This booklet helps signpost you to these opportunities which you can access now, while you study for a medical degree at both Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University, so that you can step into your career with a head start whatever you decide to do.

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	Third and fourth year	Third to final year	Penultimate and final year
-----------	-----------------------	---------------------	----------------------------

PART ONE – Inside medical school

Think Ahead: exams and placements		Think Ahead: other medical school options	
1. Preference Informed Allocation	Page 4	1. Intercalation	Page 5
2. Clinical placements	Page 4	2. Elective destinations	Page 6
3. SCCs	Page 5	3. Medical societies	Page 6
		4. E-portfolio	Page 7
		5. Summer studentships	Page 7
		6. QUB Future Ready Award	Page 8
		7. UU Edge Award	Page 8

All years

Third and fourth year

Third to final year

Penultimate and final year

PART TWO – Outside medical school

Think Ahead: self-development		Think Ahead: external organisations	
1. Podcasts	Page 10	1. The BMA	Page 16
2. Student conferences	Page 10	2. Royal Colleges or professional association	Page 16
3. Webinars	Page 11		
4. Shadowing	Page 11	Research	
5. Teaching experiences	Page 12	1. QI audit	Page 17
6. Green cards	Page 12	2. Publications	Page 17
7. Prizes	Page 13	3. Case reports and posters	Page 18
8. Extra circular courses	Page 13		
9. Surgical logbooks	Page 14	Other helpful resources	Page 19
10. Summer schools	Page 14		
11. Leadership demonstration	Page 15		
12. Teamwork demonstration	Page 15		

PART ONE

Inside medical school



Think Ahead: exams and placements

1. Preference Informed Allocation (PIA) ●

What is it? A change in the way that the UK Foundation Programme allocation process is managed for 2024 onwards that will see applicants given a computer-generated rank. Applicants will **no longer be required to sit the SJT (situational judgement test) and the EPM (educational performance measure) and decile score will also no longer be used.**

Changes have been made to the national application forms and allocation algorithm on Oriel to support the introduction of the PIA.

How can it help you? PIA has been designed to give as many applicants as possible their first choice of foundation school.

In what year does it become important? All years

How will it work? Every eligible applicant who remains in the Foundation Programme application process after allocation to SFP or FPP programmes will be given a computer-generated rank by the Oriel system. The ranking will not be informed by performance at medical school.

The ranks will be generated when the allocation algorithm is run in Oriel. This takes place in March which is after foundation school preferencing has closed and at the point that applicants are allocated to foundation school, also known as Unit of Application (UoA).

More resources: <https://foundationprogramme.nhs.uk/programmes/2-year-foundation-programme/ukfp/>

2. 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? All years.

Top tip: Be aware of the costs of travel and accommodation to your placements and plan / budget accordingly.

More resources:

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

Back to contents

Part 1 Part 2

3. SSCs ●

What is it? Student selected components (SSCs) 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? All years.

Top tip: Choose an SSC you have an interest in that you won't get the chance to experience it 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 within your medicine degree programme, allowing you to explore specific areas of medicine in which you are interested and to gain another qualification.

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

In what year does it become important and for how long? If you are considering intercalation, it is usually best to do this after your preclinical years. However, aim to research intercalated degrees of interest before this to really evaluate which one is best for you!

Top tip: Intercalated degrees can be taken at most UK universities. It is possible to take an intercalated degree at another academic institution. Most universities offer intercalated fairs where you can find out more information about what's on offer.

More resources:

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

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? Penultimate and final year. The timing of the elective and how long it lasts depends on your medical school, but they are normally for four-eight weeks.

Top tip: Think about how you will finance your elective and there may be funding and grants available to you.

More resources:

- [BMA Northern Ireland Student Finance guide](#)
- 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. electives.net/splash

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 speciality and gives you a taste of what specialities 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
- uusuu.org

4. E-portfolio ●

What is it? A collection of documents providing evidence of learning, achievements, and personal and professional development.

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. QUB Future Ready Award ●

What is it? The Future Ready Award (formerly called 'Degree Plus) is an employability award that allows you to gain formal recognition and a certificate for the extracurricular experience you gain during your time at Queen's.

How can it help you? It can help enhance your employability. Additionally, activities that count towards your Future Ready 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:

[EDGE Award Portal - EDGE Award Portal \(ulster.ac.uk\)](#)

[The EDGE Award \(uusuu.org\)](#)

7. UU EDGE Award ●

What is it? The Ulster EDGE Award (Engagement, Development, Graduate Employment), supported by leading graduate employer PwC, has been designed to enhance the employability of Ulster University undergraduate (full and part-time students).

How can it help you? Provides official recognition of evidence of activities outside your programme of study.

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

Top tip: Register online via the Awards website as early as you can.

More resources:

[EDGE Award Portal - EDGE Award Portal \(ulster.ac.uk\)](#)

[The EDGE Award \(uusuu.org\)](#)

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 speciality.

How can it help you? Shows commitment to speciality and is an opportunity to learn more about a speciality 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 speciality and help you gain specific knowledge on topics related to that speciality. Attendance shows commitment to speciality and CPD (continuing professional development). See 'E-portfolio' on page 8.

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 speciality.

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? All years.

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. Your chances might be better than you think, with generally low numbers of applicants or entrants.

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 specialities. 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: Many of these events are now hybrid, 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? From the year you start surgical attachment.

Top tip: You should ensure the logbook is up to date. It can be useful for future applications to surgical training. You can also use an app called 'Mobile eLogbook' which can be downloaded from the app store or from this website <https://www.elogbook.org/>. You can also log operations via your account on the website itself.

More resources: asit.org

10. Summer Schools ●

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

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

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 the support and tools you need to guide you through your studies. Being actively involved in a BMA committee – such as the Northern Ireland medical students committee (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 will help enhance and support you at every step of your career journey in a particular specialty. It also gives you access to a wide range of benefits and opportunities you might otherwise miss out on.

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 health care 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 and consultants.

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

Top tip: 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 speciality 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 – it can take a long time to get published, the earlier you can start, the better!.

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
- medicpursuits.co.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 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, 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 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.

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 onExamination exam support and guidance for all members

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

Contact us

BMA Northern Ireland

T: 028 9026 9666

E: BMANorthernIreland@bma.org.uk

Web: bma.org.uk

Twitter: [@QBMA_NI](https://twitter.com/QBMA_NI)

Instagram: [@QBMA_NI](https://www.instagram.com/QBMA_NI)

[Back to contents](#)

[Part 1](#) [Part 2](#)

#ThinkAheadMed



British Medical Association

BMA House, Tavistock Square, London
WC1H 9JP
bma.org.uk

© British Medical Association, 2023

BMA 20230556