

Elective Advisory Guidance

This document is intended as an interim guidance. In light of the constantly evolving Covid-19 pandemic and its effects nationally and globally, we fully expect that further updates to this guidance may need to be incorporated.

It is also important to clarify that this guidance has been developed in response to an extraordinary set of circumstances in which adaptations to usual elective programmes may be necessary in the short to medium term.

The elective is an integral part of the MB ChB course in all UK medical schools. Elective opportunities receive very positive feedback from students and can be transformational in their relationship to clinical practice. In alignment with the Student Selected Component (SSC), the elective delivers core learning, but, in comparison to other parts of the course, it provides students with some choice in the topic area. For the elective, students are often encouraged to experience healthcare in a different setting, with many students taking this as an opportunity to gain experience in an international setting. Across the UK, elective programmes vary in the timing, length and nature of the experience. Some schools may place more emphasis on clinical learning, whereas other schools encourage project-based work or give students the opportunity to engage in non-clinical activities. In some schools, electives are closely linked to the global health learning of the course.

In order to ensure the safety of students during an unpredictable time, many medical schools cancelled elective placements in 2020. Due to further waves of the pandemic medical schools had to make some modifications to elective programmes in 2021. Most medical schools included desk-based projects as an additional option. International travel for placements has been very limited, with some schools not permitting such placements at all and other schools limiting the availability of international placements to a small group of students fulfilling specific criteria.

As moves are made to carefully open international travel, students will want to know how this may affect their ability to complete their elective overseas.

Current challenges

Following the interruption of clinical learning and assessments in 2020, the pandemic continues to have an impact on medical courses. Clinical placements have resumed in all medical schools, but clinical learning opportunities may still in some areas be more limited than usual. Pandemic-related modifications of medical courses may also affect the duration and timing of elective programmes in the coming years.

Despite vaccination progress, uncertainty remains in how the pandemic will progress in 2021/2022. Vaccination rates vary considerably between countries and new variants may emerge compromising

vaccination effectiveness. Over the past few months there have been frequent changes in the entry requirements for most countries, which have often been implemented at short notice.

Considerations for the elective

Although international travel has resumed to some extent, students continue to face significant challenges and uncertainty when planning an elective in an international location. While international electives require advanced planning, it is impossible to predict how foreign travel advice and entry requirements for destination countries and the UK will develop over the next few months. Currently, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) advises against all but essential travel to a number of countries which are often chosen as elective destinations. Other countries remain closed for arrivals. As a result, final approval for international placements can only be given at short notice.

The planning of an international elective requires time and often financial commitments at an early stage. Uncertainties around final elective approvals may be stressful for students and result in disappointment when elective plans need to be cancelled at a late stage. Furthermore, there may be unforeseen costs for students due to the requirements around Covid-19 testing and quarantine, as well as the risk of financial losses, as insurers may not reimburse pandemic-related elective cancellations costs. As a result, the decision to undertake an international elective requires very careful consideration at present.

Whilst UK medical schools face many common challenges associated with international electives, each medical school is responsible for developing its own policy in relation to electives. Decisions will be taken by the executive boards of each individual medical school taking factors such as the UK FCDO advice, university guidance, the specific context and course design into account. Consequently, there may be some national variability in elective provision, with each school retaining its duty of care towards its own students. The Medical Schools Council cannot provide overarching guidance on international placements, and students must adhere to the local policy adopted by their own medical school. It is anticipated that the majority of UK medical school elective placements for 2022 will remain UK-based.

Adapting the elective to the current circumstances

The elective remains an important part of the undergraduate medical curriculum and provides students with the opportunity to study a chosen field of healthcare in more depth. In each medical school the elective has its distinct learning outcomes which form part of the overall learning outcomes of the medical degree. Medical schools need to ensure that learning opportunities are available so that students can achieve the elective learning outcomes, although elective requirements may need to be modified due to pandemic-related course revisions and placement availability. Each medical school should be able to make explicit how the learning outcomes of the elective have been covered in revised programmes.

Students should be made aware that a range of valuable options for electives exist which require no international travel. Student feedback shows that UK based electives provide a high quality opportunity to extend and develop unique aspects of their education. Medical schools should consider how they can support students to identify UK-based elective options and consider novel learning opportunities. This may involve making options beyond hospital medicine visible,

implementing systems to raise awareness of available projects, or encouraging the development of innovative electives. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic a number of medical schools have developed innovative initiatives such as online global health courses or virtual electives. Medical schools should continue working together to share new ideas and to make under-utilised elective opportunities available to the wider UK medical school community.