

My ophthalmic elective: Harvard Medical School

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Gordan Hall of Medicine at Harvard Medical School.

Medical electives are an excellent opportunity to learn, enjoy and explore countries and their healthcare systems. I was grateful to do mine in ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School (HMS). This article will share my personal experience working at HMS with some tips for other medical students thinking about organising an elective abroad.

How I organised my elective

Before starting, I would highly recommend asking yourself these questions:

1. Which speciality am I interested in?
2. Where do I want to go?
3. What do I want to gain from this elective?

As an aspiring ophthalmologist, the first question was easy to answer. However, I pondered more over the second question. After several days of indecisiveness, my friend suggested USA. He was considering moving to the USA and felt that the elective would help him make his decision. I had no such intentions but was fascinated by the idea. The USA has an entirely different healthcare system, and I was curious to see how it compared to the NHS.

The third question will help to define your goals and learning objectives. For example, you may aspire to do some research during your elective and get it published. Or you may want to

work close to a beach and sip on Pina Colodas with friends every evening! Either way, it's good to know what you want so that you can plan accordingly. In my case, I knew that I wanted to do an elective that incorporated some research.

Now that I had decided to go to the USA, the next question was where? After looking through an eye-watering number of websites, I stumbled upon the Harvard Medical School Advanced Ophthalmology Clerkship. The elective provided an excellent opportunity for students that were interested in incorporating research into their clinical placement. I was instantly drawn to this placement. I applied and was fortunate to be accepted. The criteria for application success were quite ambiguous. However, their website mentions that all applicants "Must be in good academic standing at an approved medical school", and they did ask for medical school transcripts.

My experience

After I reached Boston, I went straight to Vanderbilt Halls, the residence hall for Harvard Medical School. The first thing I noticed was a tennis court in the middle of the courtyard, and as a tennis enthusiast, I already felt like I was at home. Over the next month, I made several friends on that same court. I felt like a first-year medical student living in halls making new friends all over again.



Countway Library of Medicine.

I met some incredible people, including students doing joint honours in MBBS + MBA or MBBS + PhD. I wasn't aware that these options even existed before then.

Furthermore, exploring Boston was a joy. Surprisingly, it reminded me of London – it was full of students, very multicultural, had similar architecture, plenty of nice places to eat, lovely museums and terrible weather!

I went to see my supervisor at his practice the Monday after I arrived. My ophthalmology experience over the next few weeks was brilliant. My elective was meant to be a joint scholarly experience primarily focusing on research. However, my supervisor was very accommodating and allowed me to join him in clinics and theatre, so long as my research was on track.

Table 1: My average weekly schedule

	AM	PM
Monday	Clinic	Clinic
Tuesday	Clinic	Research
Wednesday	Theatre - Cataract	Research
Thursday	Clinic	Clinic
Friday	Theatre - Refractive Eye Surgery	Research

Over the next four weeks, I was primarily based at my supervisor's practice, but on several occasions went to Massachusetts Eye and Ear Hospital for both clinics and theatre sessions. I attended several clinics in various sub-specialities, including cornea, oculoplastics, neuro-ophthalmology clinics and refractive eye surgery consultations.

I was also able to attend several lectures, meetings and conferences. All in all, my clinical experience was excellent and gave me an excellent foundation to build my research on. It's important to remember that when you're doing an elective you don't have much time. As many researchers already know a month often isn't enough time to find conclusive results. I thus had to pass on the data I had managed to collect to my supervisor and look forward to learning the results from the study.

I would highly recommend elective students stay involved in the research they worked on after they leave – so that your work is acknowledged. Whilst data collection is difficult to continue, you can write the first draft of the research article. This will show your supervisor that you're motivated and keen to be involved even after you've finished.

I built a great relationship with my supervisor and have corresponded with him several times since then. He was also happy to write me a letter of recommendation if I ever changed my mind about working in the US.

Funding

I'm sure many readers are wondering what the cost of my elective cost was, so let's address the elephant in the room. To put it softly, it wasn't cheap! Feel free to go to the HMS website to see the up-to-date cost. Most electives in Ivy League medical schools are expensive. But this should not put you off from applying to them. There are several ways to fund your elective. I've listed some useful resources below. This is not an exhaustive list, and you should also do your research too.

- Patrick Trevor-Roper Undergraduate Travel Award <https://www.rcophth.ac.uk/professional-resources/awards-and-prizes/>
- Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow Medical Elective Scholarship <https://rcpsg.ac.uk/awards-and-scholarships/medical-elective-scholarship>
- BMDST-RSM Student Elective Awards <https://www.rsm.ac.uk/prizes-and-awards/travel-grants-and-bursaries/>
- Ophthalmology Section: Travelling Fellowship Bursary <https://www.rsm.ac.uk/prizes-and-awards/travel-grants-and-bursaries/>

Some medical schools may even have internal funding. Further, NHS bursaries helped to cover the cost of accommodation. Personally, I filled out as many funding forms as I was eligible for as I had nothing to lose! In your forms, give as many details as possible about the clinical / research work you plan to undertake. Funding bodies, amongst other things, are more likely to fund well-planned electives. Overall, bursaries helped me fund half of my elective.

At this point, I would also like to emphasise that there are plenty of electives that are far cheaper than this one. I have plenty of friends that spent far less and still had an incredible experience. So decide your electives based on your aspirations and not on the name of the institution.

A final word

Overall, I had an excellent experience and wouldn't change a thing. Harvard Medical School did live up to its name and my expectations.

A last piece of advice – plan early, think about the three questions I mentioned above, and more importantly, have fun! This is one of the few chances to enjoy, explore and work with your friends, so make the most of it.

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