

How to apply for the academic foundation programme

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ABSTRACT

The UK Academic Foundation Programme (AFP) is a two-year foundation programme that includes an additional “academic theme” undertaking work in research, management/leadership, or education and teaching activities. The limited number of AFP places makes the AFP application a highly competitive process. This article outlines points to consider when applying for the AFP and successful application strategies. Reviewed by successful AFP applicants, this article provides specific insight into applications to the London Academic Unit of Application (deanery).

1. Introduction

The Academic Foundation Programme (AFP) is an attractive opportunity for many final year medical students applying for their foundation year jobs in the United Kingdom. UK Foundation training is a two-year training programme for doctors, undertaken after medical school. It is usually composed of six, four-month rotations across medicine, surgery and general practice. Completed over the same period, the AFP offers an additional “academic theme”.

This “academic theme” is dedicated to the undertaking of academic research, management/leadership, or education and teaching activities. These activities are either spread throughout the two years (one day a week) in “integrated programs” or timetabled as a four month “block” during the second foundation year [1]. In most academic placements, foundation doctors organise a project, which can vary in nature from laboratory-based research, to clinically-focused quality improvement projects (QIP) [1]. Projects are overseen by a dedicated Academic Supervisor, who acts in addition to the foundation doctor's Educational Supervisor. AFP doctors will also be involved to varying degrees with teaching undergraduate students, attending training, departmental activities and with ongoing clinical commitments [2]. There are a limited number of AFP places, comprising of 5% of all FP posts in a given year [1]. Application is highly competitive. This article outlines some strategies to consider when applying for the AFP, with specific insight from AFPs across London.

1.1. Assessing suitability for the AFP

The first thing to consider is whether the AFP is something you really desire. There are numerous pros and cons to applying for the AFP and evaluation of these is crucial to develop a genuine answer to: “Why do you want the AFP?”.

Attractions of the AFP include:

- The AFP offers protected time to explore areas of interest in greater depth; this may attract those with personal interests in research, teaching or management. Receiving invaluable supervision and guidance from leading experts [1], within the infrastructure of a supporting institution, could become lifelong sources of inspiration. Since academic placements are usually coordinated through universities, a variety of resources will be accessible, including teaching on research methodologies and statistics, libraries and electronic journals.
- The AFP can be highly productive leading to achievements which could increase your personal value in the competitive job market. Examples of these are listed below:
 1. An academic project may lead to valuable practical research experience, a scientific publication, national or international oral and poster presentations
 2. Opportunities to attend and network at conferences
 3. A QIP may lead to improvements in patient care
 4. Teaching-focused AFPs can lead doctors to develop teaching

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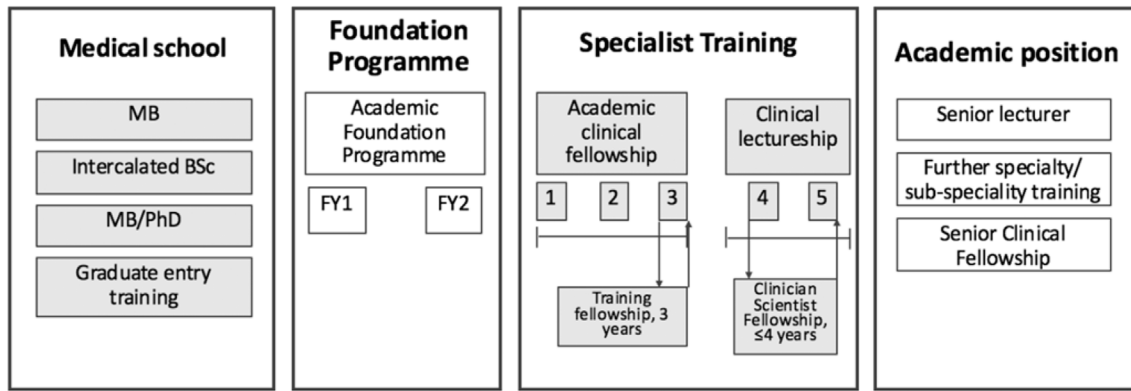


Fig. 1. The integrated academic training pathway, redrawn from Ref. [13].

courses for medical students

- The AFP can be a stepping-stone towards a given career (Fig. 1). Or simply, it is an opportunity to assess whether a future academic, teaching-focused or management-focused career is desired.
- Even if academic careers are not continued beyond AFP, many transferable skills may be learnt, including time management, information technology, writing and teaching. These are invaluable across a range of medical careers, and help with the consultation of patients [6]. There are often opportunities to teach clinical and pre-clinical students in every AFP, which are often reported to be enjoyable and rewarding [6]. Doctors in the AFP develop specific skills in experimental techniques, literature review and statistics, which can expand horizons beyond medicine [2].
- The AFP jobs offer stability. For example, in the London deanery, both foundation years of the AFP are in London-based hospitals. FP positions, however, have both near and far placements over the two years.
- The Situational Judgement Test (SJT) is a test, which assesses approaches to situations encountered in the workplace, undertaken by all final year medical students before foundation years. It is a major contributor to a medical student's rank when applying for the FP. FPs do not attend an interview. The AFP job positions are subject to satisfactory completion of the SJT, yet the SJT score is not used for ranking purposes. Rank is instead based on academic achievements and interview score.
- Therefore, the AFP is also one of the rare times early in medical careers for individuals to have a formal medical interview. The preparation towards this interview also offers ample opportunity for developing skills in answering interview questions, which can enhance success at future interviews, including those for speciality and core medical or surgical training.
- The opportunity to practice the self-reflection, organisation and preparation required for AFP applications will help harness the skills ultimately required for all future jobs in a medical career and can develop and realise career aspirations. The AFP job results are published a few months before the FP jobs.

There are many reasons why the AFP is not so attractive, however:

- Applicants on the FP spend a larger amount of time in clinical practice. This provides more opportunity to develop clinical competencies and to ensure all necessary achievements are met, which will build the foundation of future clinical practice within a given speciality. Some applicants may prioritise building clinical competencies over pursuing academia.
- AFP applicants often have less choice over other hospital rotations if positions are chosen based on the academic rotation. The combination of clinical rotations in FPs may be more tailored to individual preferences than those in AFPs. There are very few jobs that offer

three surgical rotations, for example. For those pursuing a career in surgery, larger surgical exposure in foundation years may be preferable.

- Research is difficult [7]. Academic projects may lead to frustrations when ambitious goals are not met and is stressful if supervisors have unrealistic expectations [2]. Applying for ethical approval and recruiting sufficient samples for studies can be difficult, and often administrative tasks fall on the junior members of a research team [6].
- There may be little flexibility of choice in academic work undertaken and there is a possibility of being allocated a project that is not of core interest. Autonomy and choice are key to maintaining academic motivation [8,9] and it is often cited as the best thing about pursuing academic careers [2].
- The AFP application is more time-consuming than the FP application, and will need to be completed in the final year of medical school. This may be at the expense of clinical skills practice and additional learning opportunities.
- The academic block can also be un-banded, resulting in reduced pay for AFP doctors.

1.2. The AFP application

- There are two parts to the AFP application:
 - Part 1 - The written application done through a standard national application form via an on-line portal: the "Foundation Programme Application System" (Oriel: <https://www.oriel.nhs.uk/Web/Account/LandingPage>)
 - Part 2 - An interview
- On-line applications begin around October in each year and are done in parallel to the standard FP applications through the same application window.
- Before the on-line applications begin, UK medical schools will nominate eligible candidates and submit each applicant's "medical school performance score" (comprised of their class and decile rank in year) to Oriel. Non-UK medical school graduates, or already-graduated medical students, need to submit documentation direct to the United Kingdom Foundation Programme Office's (UKFPO) Eligibility Office for an assessment of their eligibility.
- All applicants then need to register and confirm their applications on Oriel.
- The UKFPO website publishes comprehensive guidance and information on the AFP selection process [11].

1.3. Part 1 – the written application

1.3.1. Choosing a deanery

- Part 1 of the AFP application is the point at which there is most

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