Your elective is likely to be one of the highlights of your studies. Most universities will let you go almost anywhere and pursue any relevant interest.

The Electives Network (TEN) helps you find your dream placement, whether that is working in a remote clinic deep in a tropical jungle or supporting world-experts with their research.

This guide is your starting point to a safe, thrilling and memorable experience, whatever you decide to do.
What is an elective?

An elective can be one of the most rewarding times of a student midwife’s career; a chance to see midwifery practised in a remote and under-resourced area, a fully-equipped antenatal unit in a large hospital, or a small midwife-led unit. Taking the time to plan an elective that meets your professional and personal needs can provide insight into the most challenging contemporary global health issues, and put you on a career path you had never before considered.

One of the best things about an elective is that most universities allow their students a lot of choice over what they do; as long as you make a good proposal, and can argue how your elective will be a good educational, clinical or enrichment experience which will help you prepare for your future career, your university should be happy. This free choice means you can do something which interests YOU. That’s why The Electives Network have always worked to help students make their own choices and arrange their own electives.

Why is it important?

By taking the time to plan an elective that is both professional and personally fulfilling you’ll be able to discover much about yourself and your future as a midwife. You’ll be able to contribute to the healthcare system of a community, and experience different cultures. It’s also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do something different!

The experience you gain whilst on elective can contribute towards your professional and personal development, expose you to therapies and care models which you won’t see during your other clinical placements, and depending on where you go, call into question assumptions about how culture and society impact concepts of health and disease.

Be prepared to have your preconceived ideas challenged. Every elective is different. What one student experiences in a clinic in Nairobi might be completely different to what a student arriving a month later will see. The unexpected will happen on elective. Don’t underestimate the effort that is required to plan an elective; your elective is only as good as you make it.
How to plan

Where to start

Right here, right now. The Electives Network is one of the most comprehensive healthcare elective databases in existence, so our site is a great place to start. We have details of hundreds of hospitals and elective placements in more than 140 countries.

Our Country Profiles, Case Studies, and Blog Reports are there to give you some ideas about where to go. And if you already know where you want to go, you can search our database for existing student reports.

If you’re not sure a hospital placement is right for you, then you should try the ‘Something Different’ section of our site, which gives details of other types of elective. Think traditional midwifery with indigenous people, research institutes, prisons or healthcare management as just some ideas.

If you are fortunate enough to study at a university which splits the elective group, then take advantage of this. You may want to have an elective in the summer sun, or you may prefer to use the winter months (especially if you are from a colder climate and want to head to a very hot country!). Some teaching hospitals only accept international students at certain times of the year. The earlier you begin your research, the better placed you’ll be to do the elective that you want to.

Which country?

Think carefully about the level of experience that you want to gain. An elective in Hawaii might mean that drinks on the beach at sunset and early morning surf sessions are plentiful, but it might not give you the same sort of experience as working in a remote community outreach team in the jungles of Borneo. You will get the most out of your elective if you make it personal to you.

Consider the local language. A lack of familiarity with the local dialect can put extra burden on staff, limit your ability to interact with patients, and hinder any contributions you would like to make to the care and treatment plan. It will also make it harder for you to truly experience the local culture in your free time. You should always make every effort to learn some basics of the local language before you leave. If you are already learning another language, an elective in the right country can be an excellent opportunity to practice.
What setting?

Think about the health system that you will be working in, whether it is a fully-staffed, fully-equipped Mother and Baby Unit in a large tertiary hospital, or a small rural antenatal clinic. The level of experience and exposure that you will get will depend on where your elective is located and what kind of institution you go to.

A metropolitan hospital can see you working alongside well known health professionals, with access to cutting edge equipment and research facilities. But you may find yourself just a face in a crowd. Working in a small rural clinic, although often under-resourced and under-staffed, may see you welcomed and embraced by the team and the local community.

There are many different models of midwifery care to choose from. You may want to experience grassroots, traditional midwifery, where women from the local community are informally trained by traditional midwives. You may want to be part of a consultant-led unit (CLU), where you can work with the best equipment, and may rub shoulders with leading obstetricians involved in important research. You may prefer a midwife-led model of care, where midwives are at the centre of administration and management as well as treatment. Do you want to experience antenatal, intrapartum, or postnatal care on your elective? Perhaps you want to help with home births and community antenatal programs with a community midwifery team.

Think about what areas you most want to gain experience in, whether this decision is based on what you will most enjoy or be interested in, areas which you haven’t experienced much in the past, or experiences which will be valuable for your future career.
How to apply

The application process for an elective varies depending on the host. You should check for details on the ‘how to apply’ tab on the hospital profile you have chosen, and ideally make an enquiry beforehand to check details of the application process. Applying for an elective will often require a letter of introduction, a CV and a university transcript or similar proof of study.

Tips for your letter of introduction:
- Address it to the elective co-ordinator or visiting student co-ordinator (unless specified otherwise on the hospital profile).
- Provide dates of travel, and preferred specialty.
- Explain why you have chosen to do an elective at their institution.
- Explain what you would like to learn on elective.
- Refer to what you have already done to prepare for the placement (extra study, language lessons, etc.).
- Check for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Include contact details.

Tips for your CV:
- Keep it to a single A4 page, or two pages at the most.
- Highlight academic achievements and clinical experience.
- Include references from your home university and, if possible, previous clinical placements.

Pre-Departure Planning

Practical

Contact your embassy or high commission to let them know your travel plans. Unless people know where you are they cannot ensure your safety or have you removed in a worst case scenario.

Financial

Funding an elective is challenging, but there are many options for you to explore. Try contacting local charities or organisations. They may ask that you submit a report or deliver a short presentation on your return.

There may be interest free loans available to you from financial institutions for your elective; as a healthcare student about to graduate, you are considered a fairly safe financial risk. Your home country’s government may have “overseas study loans” that you may also be able to access.
There are some organisations and institutions which offer bursaries and awards for elective placements, such as the Iolanthe Trust. The Electives Network also runs an essay competition with a cash prize to help you fund your elective.

Why not crowdfund your elective? You may find that some of your friends and family are willing to sponsor you to help you raise the money. You could try some online fundraising to get sponsorship from the general public, especially if you are planning a particularly interesting elective, or a placement which helps a good cause.

One enterprising student was able to finance her elective simply by offering to take pictures of company logos and products at some of the more iconic places they visited.

If you are going to a more obscure destination, make sure that you check the availability of ATMS before you leave. Shop around for different travel money options to get the best deal.

Take a look at our database of country-specific funding options for ideas of ways to avoid breaking into your savings, taking out more student loans, or running to the Bank of Mum & Dad.

Draw up a list of expenses for your trip and work out a budget including all possible expenditures.

The following checklist gives you an idea of where the bulk of cash might go:

1. Flights
2. Accommodation
3. Food
4. Immunisations
5. Equipment - (rucksack, clothes, etc.)
6. First Aid Kit
7. Map(s) and Guide book(s)
8. Transport
9. Travel insurance
10. Specialist Medical Travel Insurance
11. Visa (if applicable)
12. Communications (mobile, laptop, phone cards, etc.)
13. Excursions
Apply to as many funding providers as you can think of and make your application stand out. Here are some places we think are worth contacting for financial support:

- First stop ... your university
- Our database for grants, awards and scholarships
- Banks
- Charities
- Pharmaceutical companies
- Local businesses
- Religious organisations
- Specialist job agencies for part-time work

**Indemnity Cover**

Indemnity cover is extremely important for all clinical placements and work in healthcare, including many forms of voluntary or ‘goodwill’ work, and elective placements are no exception. Indemnity regulations may be in place in the country you travel to, so make sure you check this first.

You should never perform clinical work for which you are not indemnified against the possibility of an accident, mistake, or any other unfortunate circumstance under which you could be accused of negligence.

Have a look at TEN’s Indemnity Guide in the Essential Resources section of our site for more details about what indemnity means and advice on how you can go about arranging cover for your elective.

**Specialist Healthcare Elective Travel Insurance**

As you’ll be working in a medical establishment, it is VITAL that you also take out specialist medical travel insurance to cover you when working. You need an extremely comprehensive travel care insurance package.

If planning to drive while abroad, you should check that your insurance policy covers you for medical expenses in the event of an accident.

It’s imperative you have medical elective travel insurance before going on an elective. Getting the correct policy to suit your needs can be difficult. The most common mistake is to purchase insurance that doesn’t cover you while you’re
working in a hospital or clinic. Clinical work has its own specific risks for healthcare staff, and most travel insurance policies will NOT cover you during your shift.

Before you buy, ask if the following are covered:

- Cancellation for exam resits
- Portable medical equipment
- Emergency medical biological fluids
- Personal Accident needle-stick injury
- Loss of money or passport
- Loss of luggage
- Delays, cancellations and missed departures
- Personal and legal liabilities as detailed in the policy
- Personal accident
- Money Back Guarantee
- Driving abroad - Does the policy cover you for medical expenses in the event of an accident?
- If you’re planning to do any semi-extreme or extreme sports, can cover be extended to include these?

And worth a mention:

- A fully-worded written policy is required before purchasing the cover. Read this policy very carefully for limitations on age, country, activities (particularly with reference to your clinical work), and the dates of your cover
- Check that the claims procedure is clear and well defined, make a note of the contact details in case you need them abroad and give a copy to someone at home
- Ensure that the cover is started a week or so prior to your departure so that cancellation and curtailment will be covered
- You’ll be working in a medical establishment faced with all sorts of unknown situations which most insurers don’t cover. Where possible we recommend you take out specialist medical elective travel insurance. Check out the insurance advice and links in the ‘Essential Resources’ section of our community pages for further details.

Professional

Once you have been accepted, make sure that you get written confirmation of your placement, as your university may require you to submit it before you leave.

If you have been accepted within a particular department, talk to some of your own tutors about the sort of medical situations that you will be confronted with. Be aware of your own competencies and situations in which those boundaries could be questioned.
Safety

Ensure that you have spoken to your GP about your travel plans. Ensure that your immunisations are up to date and you have the relevant prophylaxis. Visit the dentist before you go and take a supply of contact lenses and extra glasses, if applicable. Prepare your own medical kit, and be sure to include insect repellent, bandages and plasters, malaria prophylactic tablets, anti-fungal powder, rehydration tablets, Imodium, and sterile needles.

While you are there, be aware of situations that may ordinarily be deemed safe in your home town. If you take night shifts on a labour ward you may see some dramatic and interesting births, but it may mean that you find yourself travelling back to your accommodation alone in the early hours of the morning.

What to expect

Professional

As a profession, midwifery often places great emphasis on peer-to-peer teaching and an apprenticeship model. Be aware that in order to run an effective elective program, health professionals and their support staff are often placed under an increased workload in order to support and supervise elective placements. They are doing this for your benefit and the benefit of the mothers and babies who you will care for in the future. Students should consider the impact that their presence has on a health system, and try and minimise the demands that they place on their co-workers.

If you are able to learn some of the local language before you leave, you may be able to participate in more teaching opportunities and get much more out of your placement. It may also mean that more members of staff are able to help and guide you.
Ethical

You may find yourself facing ethical and clinical dilemmas on your elective. You might be asked to undertake procedures that are beyond your competence, or are not covered by your indemnity. You may have issues understanding local languages or dialects, and approaches to issues such as consent may mean that tribal leaders, heads of families or husbands are involved in decisions regarding a patient’s treatment. While respecting the local culture is important, cultural differences should never be used as an excuse to allow poor practice or to permit avoidable harm to a mother or her child.

Given the scale of health issues that students might encounter in remote or resource-poor settings, it can be tempting to take on more responsibility than you are qualified to accept. Cultural relativism coupled with the encouragement of staff should never be make you feel that you need to go along with practices that you would decline at home. Always work within the limits of your competence.

Questions to ask yourself:
- Why are you not allowed to do this procedure at home?
- Are you capable of performing it without suitable supervision?
- Are you putting your patient or yourself at risk?
- Would it be possible or practicable to ask for supervision without imposing excessive burdens on other key health professionals?

Cultural

Try to find out as much as you can about the culture you are going into. Faux pas happen frequently when a person doesn’t know about a culture, and hopefully your hosts will laugh with you at the issue. Reading the relevant book from the “Culture Shock” series will help.

There are some major issues that you should be aware of so that you do not offend or cause issues during your stay. In some countries drinking alcohol, swimming in a bathing suit, or women wearing short skirts or not covering shoulders can be deeply offensive.

In a few countries, homosexuality is illegal and can carry extremely heavy penalties. If you are an LGBTQ student, you should seriously consider the wisdom of working in these countries - there are many others that would welcome you.
Resources

Checklist

- Passport (plus photocopies of your passport to be put in a separate place in case your passport goes astray)
- Visas (if required)
- Flight/Travel Documents
- Travel Insurance documents
- Letter from your university confirming status
- Letter from your elective confirming your placement
- Proof of indemnity
- Vaccination certificate
- Emergency contact information

- Dental Check
- Vaccinations
- Insect Repellent
- Sun Cream
- Water Purifiers
- Analgesics, antidiarrheal agent, antiseptic creams, antihistamines
- Needles, syringes, alcohol wipes, waterproof dressings
- Malaria Prophylactics
- Post-Exposure prophylaxis
- Anti-Fungal Powder
- Rehydration sachets

- Pocket midwifery handbooks
- Plastic Gloves
- Stethoscope
- Fob watch
- Obstetrics wheel
- Comfortable, ward-appropriate shoes
- Stationery

While you are there

Be realistic about your expectations of the working conditions:

- Mothers with birth complications may not be able to be seen by a doctor because of huge demand and staffing issues
- Not all patients may be treated to the standards you might anticipate
- Equipment and supplies may be limited and often inadequate
- Families may be expected to provide meals, bedding, and even basic medical supplies
• You may feel totally out of your depth and ineffective at first.

It takes time to gain confidence and expertise.

Where healthcare is scarce, healthcare personnel often need to be extremely innovative in the way in which they work in order to provide effective care. In addition, many healthcare workers may find themselves performing tasks that they are not specifically trained to do, simply out of necessity. You should be prepared to take on new duties and use makeshift equipment or existing equipment in new ways, but all times keeping in mind the boundaries of your ability.

There is often a big difference in the way you are treated as a midwifery student abroad in contrast with your time as a student in your home country and this in turn can lead to problems. It is important that your elective is well structured and supervised, as poor supervision can place you in ethically and legally difficult situations. Even if you are working on a hectic ward in a poor country where healthcare provision is scarce, you should not take on the role of a fully-qualified midwife.

You are strongly recommended not to treat patients without some supervision. It is also ethically important that mothers and families know that you are a student and that you are not able to take full responsibility for their diagnosis and treatment.

But on a lighter note, enjoy your elective! Keep a record of as much as you can, not only so you can write up your experiences later as a case study or in an essay, but also so you can relive your memories. Use your spare time well; you are in a different place with a different culture – so take this opportunity to experience as much as you can!

After you return

You’re bound to have experiences on your elective unlike any you have had before. Photos and journals will make reports and professional articles once home much easier.

Please only take photos of people, particularly in a clinical setting, if they are happy for you to do so. Certain cultures and religions, for example, can take great offence at having their photo taken. Similarly check the legality of photography in public places as some countries have strict restrictions on photographing public buildings.
Finally, we hope you’ll come back and tell us how it was for you. Your feedback is invaluable and will help future students. Please get in touch to update us on experiences, help us keep our information accurate and up-to-date, tell us to feature other specialist areas or just let us look at the photos. Don’t forget that we run competitions with cash prizes for feedback and case studies, and these can often be easily converted later to be a publishable article for a midwifery journal.

From all of the team here at the Electives Network, we hope you have a safe and fantastic trip.