Requirements for foreign medical graduates who wish to pursue medical education and training in the USA

International Medical Graduates (IMGs) must be ECFMG certified prior to beginning their training program in the United States that is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME).

To obtain ECFMG (Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates) Certification, an IMG must obtain an USMLE/ECFMG Identification number by registering at ECFMG online. Once an IMG has obtained this number, he/she can use it to complete the Application for ECFMG Certification via the Interactive Web Application (IWA). Once the Application for ECFMG Certification, including the notarized Certification of Identification Form (Form 186), has been accepted by ECFMG, the IMG may then apply for United States Medical Licensing Exams (USMLE exams).

Steps to obtain ECFMG Certificate

- Apply for ECFMG certification.
  
  You cannot apply for USMLE exams without first applying for ECFMG certification; however, you will get a certification after completing the USMLE step 1 and step 2 exams.

- Satisfy the medical science examination requirement.
  
  USMLE Step 1 and Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK) are the exams currently administered that satisfy this requirement.

- Satisfy clinical and communication requirements; a passing performance on Step 2 CS of the USMLE has satisfied this requirement so far. However, the clinical skill exam has been discontinued this year after being suspended for about 18 months since the beginning of COVID 19. For qualified applicants who have not passed Step 2 CS and intend to enter the 2021 or 2022 Match, ECFMG has developed pathways to satisfy this requirement, which includes an Occupational English Test (OET exam).

- Primary Source verification of IMGs medical education credentials.
The time required to complete the certification process is different for each individual. Both medical school students and graduates may begin the certification process and may apply for the required exams as soon as they meet the eligibility requirements for examination. However, since one of the requirements for ECFMG Certification is that the final medical diploma be verified by ECFMG with the issuing medical school, an IMG cannot complete the certification process until after graduation from medical school. The time required for some aspects of the certification process, such as the time required by a medical school to verify medical education credentials, is beyond the control of ECFMG, wherefore timely verification of final medical diplomas and examination transcripts by medical schools will facilitate the certification process.

**Residency Match**

You will get ECFMG certificate after the completion of Step 1 and Step 2 exams as we mentioned earlier; however, you don’t need to be ECFMG certified to begin your residency application. You can apply after you complete one or more of the USMLE steps with the expectation that you will be able to complete the pending exams and make scores available to the residency programs before the interview selection. You need to be ECFMG certified before “Match.”

Once they submit applications for residency programs, they will go through interviews and may be selected for Match. The time from a residency application to match takes about 8 months. Typically, foreign medical graduates apply for 80-100 hospitals all over the US, choosing one or more specialties of their interest to increase their chance of getting enough interviews for a safe match; For example, a person could choose internal medicine, pediatrics, family medicine, surgery, neurology, etc.

**Applications for residencies do not guarantee that you will get interviews or a residency. It depends on how competitive your application is among all the applicants.**

International medical graduates (IMGs) cannot directly get a job in the hospitals without going through these steps.
1) Pass the USMLE exams

The United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) is a three-step examination program for medical licensure in the United States. It is sponsored by the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) and the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME). U.S. physicians with an MD degree and international medical graduates are required to pass this examination before being permitted to practice medicine in the United States unsupervised.

USMLE Step 1 examines how you understand and apply basic sciences to the practice of medicine. It is a one-day computer-based multiple-choice exam that emphasizes anatomy, behavioral science, biochemistry, microbiology, pathology, pharmacology, physiology and communication skills. **Starting no earlier than January 26, 2022, the USMLE Step 1 scoring system will change from a three-digit numerical score to pass/fail.**

The current USMLE step 1 passing score is 194 out of 300 possible points.

USMLE Step 1 tests everything you’ve learned in your first two years of pre-clinical medical education. Ideally, you should spend 4-6 months reviewing for the USMLE step 1.

The USMLE Step 2 CK exam evaluates whether you can apply your medical foundation and understanding of clinical science for the provision of patient care. It is a one-day 9-hour multiple-choice exam divided into eight 60-minute blocks. The current minimum passing score is 209 and the result is reported on a 3-digit scale. IMGs target a high numerical score to increase the likelihood for a successful Match. Recent data provided by the National Board of Medical Examiners, which administers the USMLE, indicates that the average score for Step 2 CK hovers just above 240- generally, it’s been 242-243 over the past few years.

The USMLE Step 2 CS assesses your ability to employ medical knowledge and skills in a practical, patient-oriented setting. However this exam was discontinued with no plan to bring it back after careful consideration by the USMLE review committee as of the Jan 2021 USMLE announcement; it was suspended since early 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
USMLE Step 3 is the final examination in the USMLE sequence leading to a license to practice medicine without supervision. The Step 3 exam devotes attention to the importance of assessing the knowledge and skills of physicians who are assuming independent responsibility for providing general medical care in patients. It is a two-day exam. The first day is referred to as Foundation of Independent Practice (FIP - 180 MCQs), and the second day, referred to as Advanced Clinical Medicine (ACM), includes 13 computer-based clinical case simulations. The current minimum passing score for USMLE step 3 is 198 and scores are reported on a 3-digit numerical scale.

You have the option of taking this exam prior to applying for residency or afterwards but before the completion of residency. **ECFMG certification is required to apply for the step 3 exam.**

*We strongly encourage you to complete all 3 steps before applying for residency as a complete examination profile will enhance your chances for getting residency interviews and it is also needed for sponsoring a VISA if a candidate needs a VISA.*

The USMLE attempt limits has been changed recently from six to four attempts per step exam, including incomplete attempts.

ECFMG requires that international medical students/graduates pass the USMLE Steps and Step Components required for ECFMG Certification within a seven-year period. This means that once you pass a Step or Step Component, you will have seven years to pass all of the other Step(s) or Step Component(s) required for ECFMG Certification. **This seven-year period begins on the exam date of the first Step or Step Component passed and ends exactly seven years from that exam date.**

If you do not pass all required Steps and Step Components within a maximum of seven years, your earliest USMLE passing performance (first USMLE exam) will no longer be valid for ECFMG Certification and you need to retake that step exam for ECFMG certification.

2) Get valuable clinical experience in the USA – It is not a must, but definitely a plus

Participate in quality hands-on externship or observership in the United States to familiarize yourself with the US health system. You may also look for opportunities to participate in research. By doing this, you can also get letters of recommendation from the doctors you work with.
3) Register with the AAMC

Obtain your ECFMG Token (also called ERAS token/residency token) through the OASIS or the My ECFMG mobile app. The ECFMG Token is a 14-digit alphanumerical number that is unique to you and is required to register with ERAS. Once you have your token, you can register with the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS).

You may request an ERAS token for the ERAS 2022 season starting June 10, 2021. The residency application process starts with ERAS registration and obtaining an ERAS token. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) runs the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS). ERAS is the centralized online application system you will use for applying to residency programs through their MyERAS Portal.

4) Pick your Residency Programs

By now, you will have taken your USMLE Exams and will have a better understanding of how competitive you are as an IMG for the Medical Residency Match. This is important and will help you screen the hundreds of US residency programs in selected specialties (Internal Medicine, Family Medicine, Psychiatry, etc.) to find those programs in which your profile can fit in.

- **USMLE steps results** – Completion of at least one or more Step with the expectation that you will be able to complete the pending step exams and make scores available to the residency programs before interview selection is required to apply for residency. Passing an exam on the first attempt and good scores will increase your chances for a successful match. Low or borderline scores and repeated attempts will significantly lower your chances to get in to a residency program.

- **Year of graduation**: Most residency program look for candidates who graduated within 3-5 years of application time and not more than 5 years. Only some programs in US are still considering candidates who graduated > 5 years ago but have competitive scores.

- **VISA status**: Being a US citizen or Green card holder is a plus since lot of programs hire only US citizen or green card holders. If you need a VISA, you should complete all 3 USMLE steps by the residency interview timeline, preferably before residency application.

- **US clinical experience and research**: We strongly urge you to get some exposure to the US health system by doing some clinical rotations (externship/observership) or research.
Letters of recommendation: usually 3 LORs obtained within 6-12 months of application process. We strongly encourage you to get at least one or two letters of recommendation from US-based physicians and you can obtain them by doing some clinical rotations or research in the US.

5) Finalize Documentation and Submit ERAS Application

You have already identified those medical residency programs for which you are qualified. Now you apply to them through ERAS and include all supporting documentation. This documentation includes your residency personal statement, ERAS Common Application Form, curriculum vitae, and letters of recommendation.

What is new in the USMLE exams in 2021 - 2022?

The USMLE Step 2CS exam consists of a series of patient encounters in which the examinee must see standardized patients (SPs), take a history, do a physical examination, determine differential diagnoses, and then write a patient note based on their determinations.

Prior to its suspension by the USMLE exams in early 2020, the former USMLE step 2 CS was the exam that satisfied the clinical and communication skills requirement of ECFMG for Foreign Medical Graduates. After the USMLE exams suspended in early 2020, the decision was made to discontinue the CS exam permanently according to the Jan 2021 USMLE announcement.

In response to the suspension and subsequent discontinuation of Step 2 CS by the USMLE program, ECFMG/FAIMER has offered six Pathways to allow international medical graduates (IMGs) to meet the clinical and communication skill requirements for ECFMG certification. These pathways were first offered to IMGs participating in the 2021 Match and is continuing and expanding to the 2022 Match.
The Pathways allow ECFMG Certification to continue to perform its critical function of providing assurance to the public and U.S graduate medical education (GME) programs that IMGs are ready to enter supervised training.

The Pathways for the 2022 Match expand on the Pathways offered for the 2021 Match. Pathways 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 will continue to be offered with some modifications, and a sixth Pathway has been added for applicants who have failed Step 2 CS one or more times and cannot retake it as it has already been discontinued. To meet the requirements for Pathway 6, the applicant’s clinical skills must be observed and evaluated by licensed physicians during six real, in-person clinical encounters using ECFMG’s Mini-Clinical Evaluation Exercise (Mini-CEX) for Pathway 6.

Pathway 1 is for applicants who currently hold or have recently held a license/registration to practice medicine without supervision in another country. Applicants who meet the eligibility requirements for Pathway 1 must apply to Pathway 1 in order to meet the clinical and communication skills requirement for ECFMG Certification, unless they failed Step 2 CS, in which case they apply through Pathway 6.

Pathway 1 is generally suitable for graduates from Sri Lanka who completed an internship and hold an independence license to practice medicine in Sri Lanka.

For more information on the Pathways, please see Requirements for ECFMG Certification for 2022 Match.

**Assessment of Communication Skills, Including English Language Proficiency**

Applicants who pursue one of the Pathways are required to attain a satisfactory score on the Occupational English Test (OET) Medicine to satisfy the communication skills requirement for ECFMG Certification. All Pathway applicants, regardless of citizenship or native language, must satisfy this requirement.
Passing Requirement

To meet ECFMG’s requirements, applicants must attain a minimum score of 350 (Grade B) on each of the four measured sub-tests of OET Medicine (Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking) in one test administration. Applicants who do not attain the minimum score on one or more of the measured sub-tests must retake all OET Medicine sub-tests (Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking) and achieve the minimum score on all sub-tests in a single test administration.

There is no limit on the number of times you can retake OET Medicine, and it is subject to scheduling availability.

*The preceding information is current as of July 26, 2021 and is subject to change. Please visit the ECFMG website for updates regarding these requirements.

References

https://www.usmle.org/
https://www.usmle.org/apply/
https://ecfmg.org/certification/certification.html
https://apps.aamc.org/myeras-web/
https://www.imgprep.com/