

USMLE to Residency: A Financial Overview

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Abstract

For International Medical Graduates (IMGs) seeking medical residency, the US offers an excellent platform. The candidate must successfully pass Step 1 and Step 2 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE), pass Occupational English Test (OET), gain valuable United States Clinical Experience (USCE), and participate in the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP). The costs involved throughout the process can be quite daunting; therefore, careful financial budgeting is recommended.

In this article, we go over the costs associated with the various stages of the journey, such as registration with the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG), examinations, USCE, the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) season, and finally, visa processing.

The United States of America provides excellent training opportunities for medical graduates from all around the globe, and each year, thousands of International Medical Graduates (IMGs) apply for the residency match. To be eligible to apply for the match, all IMGs must pass Step 1 and Step 2 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) and satisfy all the prerequisites. While it is necessary to study diligently for examinations, another matter is equally important in the hierarchy: financial budgeting. Financial considerations are sometimes underestimated when preparing for the USMLE because the exams' well-known competitive nature draws more attention. However, if resources are not adequately budgeted and planned, expenses incurred throughout the USMLE journey can be overwhelming.

- Air travel: ticket prices fluctuate throughout the year, but on average, they will cost around \$1000 - \$2000 for a return trip.
- Boarding and lodging: options include Airbnb, hotels, etc. You can save considerable money if you have relatives, friends, or alumni in the USA who will let you stay at their residence. The cost of living differs by state and whether the hospital/clinic is in the city or the suburb. The cost of food and necessities will average roughly \$1,000 per month.
- Health insurance costs \$100 per month on average.
- Malpractice insurance costs \$300 per month on average.

To summarize, 3-month electives can cost you around \$8000 - \$10000.

4) ERAS and interview season

- The Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) token costs \$155 and can be purchased through ECFMG(3).
- Sending USMLE transcripts (electronic) to programs you are applying to will cost \$80.
- ERAS Fees by Number of Programs Per Specialty:

NUMBER OF PROGRAMS	COST
0-10	\$99
11-20	\$17 each
21-30	\$21 each
31 or more	\$26 each

This can be quite stressful for IMGs and might negatively impact exam performance and outcomes. Therefore, it is pertinent to plan the financial aspects of the USMLE well ahead of time. For many IMGs, this may imply saving money while in medical school, working extra jobs, or applying for loans.

This overview covers all the major financial requirements for the residency match application cycle, and every effort has been made to summarize the cost in a succinct and digestible manner for the reader.

Please Note: The USMLE Exams(1)/Residency application cycle fees are always subject to change. Therefore, it is advisable to stay updated by visiting the official websites.

The fees mentioned in this article are current as of May 2022 and quoted in United States Dollar (USD).

1) Registering with the ECFMG

- In order to be eligible to take the USMLE exams, you need to be registered with The Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG). The ECFMG Application for certification costs \$160.

2) Examinations

- **USMLE Step 1:** \$985 exam fee + \$210 (There is an additional fee if you take the test outside of the United States)
- Uworld subscription for six months: \$439
- National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) practice exams: \$60 each, at least 2-3 on average are recommended
- **USMLE Step 2 CK:** \$985 exam fee + \$210 (There is an additional fee if you take the test outside of the United States)
- Uworld subscription for six months: \$439
- National Board of Medical Examiners (NBMEs) practice exams: \$60 each, at least 2-3 on average are recommended
- **Occupational English Test (OET):** \$500 exam fee

The OET exam has replaced Step 2 CS for the foreseeable future. Step 2 CS exam used to cost \$1580.

- On average, IMGs apply to 150 to 200 programs per specialty.
- For example, 150 programs will cost you $(\$99 + 10 \times \$17 + 10 \times \$21 + 120 \times \$26) = \$3599$
- Many candidates choose to apply in multiple specialties, and the total expenses could easily add up to \$3599 - \$5000.
- Interviews for the past couple of ERAS seasons have been conducted virtually. This has resulted in significant cost savings during the residency interview process. However, keep in mind that some specialties or programs may still conduct in-person interviews, increasing the cost even more. The average cost used to be around \$5000 (including air travel, boarding/lodging, food, etc.) before virtual interviews.
- Once you are done with the interviews, it is finally time to submit your rank order list. This is done by registering through NRMP, which costs \$85. Late fee (after January 31st) for NRMP registration is \$50.

5) VISA Processing

- Once you have been offered a position, depending on your eligibility and the sponsoring program's policy, there are two options for non-US IMGs: either a J1 or H1B visa. US-IMGs do not require a visa.
- Expenses for J1 Visa: The sponsorship fee is \$370 (An additional fee of \$220 is to be paid to Homeland Security).
- Expenses for H1B Visa (this requires USMLE Step 3): Attorney fees cost around \$1500 - 2500 (many programs pay this fee), USCIS \$460, H1 Visa fee: \$160 payable before you interview + \$38 payable at the time of interview at the embassy. Premium Processing Fee for an H1B visa is \$1410.

Please note: The cost of additional resources for exam preparation (First Aid for the USMLE, Pathoma, Boards & Beyond, OnlineMedEd, etc.) is highly dependent on individual preference and therefore has not been mentioned.

Cost (as of May 2022) comparison for the exams:

EXAMS	COST
STEP 1	\$985 exam fee + \$210 (There is an additional fee if you take the test outside of the United States)
STEP 2 CK	\$985 exam fee + \$210 (There is an additional fee if you take the test outside of the United States)
STEP 3	\$915 exam fee
OET	\$500 exam fee

Costs of additional services:

- Extension of eligibility period: \$100 per exam
- Testing region change: \$90 per region change
- A rescheduling fee for the USMLE exam: \$0 to varies (depending on the date of cancellation)

ECFMG certification: Once you have successfully passed the three exams above (USMLE Step 1, Step 2 CK, OET), you are now eligible for ECFMG certification, which is a requirement for the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP). Since the USMLE Step 2 CS was discontinued, several pathways are available for temporary certification. The application fee for the Pathway-ECFMG certification is \$925, and an additional \$100 is charged for credential verification via the Electronic Portfolio of International Credentials (EPIC) service.

3) United States Clinical Experience (USCE)

For non-US IMGs, a visitor's visa is the most commonly sought-after visa for USCE. The application fee for B1/B2 is \$160. "The more the USCE, the merrier":

- Electives/Externships/Observerships: although you can find free observership opportunities, there is usually a tuition cost for electives (which can only be done as long as you are a medical student). Depending on the number of weeks you want to sign up for, the cost can average around \$1000 - \$3500. Numerous agencies provide access to USCE but consider that they will charge you for their services. Many residency programs require around three months of USCE to apply. Three elective rotations can cost up to \$5000 or more.

To conclude, it takes years of dedication and perseverance to become a physician in the United States. The USMLE journey is costly, with prices varying for each candidate. On average, applicants should expect to pay between \$20,000 - \$30,000 for the entire process. After reading this article, hopefully, the reader will gain a better grasp of the financial commitment required to achieve their US residency goal.

1. ECFMG. Fees Overview, 2022. Available from: <https://www.ecfm.gs.org/fees/index.html>
2. OET. Assessment Structure 2022. Available from: <https://www.occupationalenglishtest.org/test-information/healthcare-professions/medicine/>
3. AAMC. Register for MyERAS® for Residency 2022. Available from: <https://students-residents.aamc.org/register-myeras/register-myeras-residency>

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