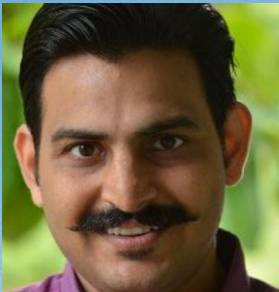


Portfolio Pathway: Procrastination or Self-Doubt?



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As an Intensive Care Medicine consultant who successfully sailed through the Portfolio Pathway – previously known as CESR, Certificate of Eligibility for Specialist Registration – for ICM in the United Kingdom, I'm here to share my journey and inspire those of you contemplating or currently pursuing this challenging but rewarding path.

Before arriving in the UK, I spent three and a half years working as an Intensivist in India. Thanks to a well-wisher and friend in the UK, I became aware of the CESR pathway early on and began preparing myself well before my move.

Despite this foresight, the reality of compiling competency documents for CESR while adapting to a new country, culture, different healthcare system, and a new professional environment was far more complex than I had anticipated. I vividly remember my first working day in the UK, feeling overwhelmed by the unfamiliar protocols and equipment. The weight of the CESR journey ahead

felt crushing, but I reminded myself of the countless hours of preparation I'd already invested. This wasn't just a career move; it was a life-changing decision that would impact not only me but my family as well.

The process

The Portfolio Pathway requires you to systematically document every facet of your career – from clinical experience and skills to research, teaching, leadership, and management roles. It's not just an administrative requirement; it's a comprehensive assessment that ensures your knowledge, skills and experience meet the standards of a UK-trained specialist in your field.



In all my mentorship sessions to CESR aspirants, I emphasise, "This pathway tests if you're ready to work on day one as a consultant in your specialty." It's not for the faint-hearted, and many doctors, myself included, face numerous challenges, both expected and unexpected.

Challenges I faced – And how I overcame them

Understanding the requirements and navigating uncertainty.

One of my first hurdles was understanding the detailed requirements for CESR. The General Medical Council (GMC) guidelines are comprehensive, but the specific expectations for your specialty may not always be clear, leading to uncertainty and confusion.

I realised the importance of attending CESR/Portfolio workshops and seeking guidance from those who had already been through the process. However, finding mentors was tough, as everyone seemed to be in the same boat, and those who had succeeded didn't always seem eager to help others. The ICM specialty-specific guidance (SSG) provided by the Faculty was invaluable. I read it multiple times to understand some of the peculiar requirements for this pathway. I learned that contacting the GMC early for advice on unclear matters could save valuable time.

Compiling and organising evidence

Gathering and organising evidence was another significant challenge. The process demands an extensive portfolio of evidence, including certificates, logbooks, appraisals, assessments, reflections, and letters of recommendation. I needed to show proof of every skill, every procedure, and every piece of research I had been involved

in. Many applicants struggle with either providing too little evidence or submitting too much irrelevant material. I had to carefully curate my portfolio, focusing on quality over quantity. As I started gathering evidence early in the journey (before moving to the UK), I had the majority of domains sorted. But it was crucial to be methodical, ensuring that every piece of evidence aligned with the capabilities required by the ICM SSG.

Aligning experience with UK standards

Coming from a different healthcare system, I had to ensure that my experience aligned with UK standards. This meant undertaking additional training, like paediatric critical care, and proactively seeking opportunities to teach, conduct audits, and engage in clinical governance activities. I remember feeling completely out of my depth during my first clinical audit presentation. The unfamiliar terminology and expectations nearly overwhelmed me, but the supportive nods from my colleagues gave me the courage to push through. These experiences, though challenging, were crucial in bridging the gap between my previous practice and UK standards.

Overcoming fear and building confidence

The fear of failing or not meeting the standards is something many international doctors face. This fear can be exacerbated by cultural differences, language barriers, and the challenges of adapting to an unfamiliar environment. There were moments when I doubted myself and wondered if I could ever achieve the level of competency expected in the UK. I vividly recall a night shift where

I felt particularly overwhelmed by the complexity of a case. As I stood there, questioning my abilities, a senior nurse noticed my hesitation and offered words of encouragement. This simple act of kindness reminded me that I wasn't alone in this journey and that building a support network was crucial for my success.

Dealing with an unsupportive work environment

Not every work environment is supportive of Portfolio applicants. Some colleagues may not understand the process, while others may view it as unnecessary or even overambitious. I encountered resistance when requesting certain documents or when seeking opportunities that were critical for my portfolio. Instead of feeling discouraged, I chose to communicate openly with my colleagues, explaining why these documents and experiences were necessary. It also helped to build a rapport with supervisors and consultants who could support me by providing the evidence I needed.

Financial and social challenges

Undertaking the Portfolio Pathway involves a significant financial burden, from the cost of applications and documentation to expenses for courses, workshops, and exams. As an overseas doctor, I also faced social isolation, cultural shock, and the pressure of being away from family. Finding a balance between personal and professional life, managing finances wisely, and staying connected with a support network back home helped me cope with these challenges. I also made it a point to build a community in the UK, which provided both emotional support and professional guidance.

Common challenges

Through discussions with colleagues and engagement with CESR forums, I learned that many of the challenges I faced were common among other International Medical Graduates (IMGs). Some of these are:

- **Difficulty securing relevant posts and placements:** Many applicants struggle to find positions that provide the necessary evidence. These positions may not always be readily available or may require additional sponsorship or funding, which can be hard to obtain. I feel this bottleneck is where most IMGs struggle.
- **Lack of reliable mentorship:** Navigating CESR without a mentor can be particularly challenging. Many applicants lack access to mentors who understand the process, leaving them feeling lost and unsupported. This is the main reason for me to continue as a CESR mentor and lead in helping other colleagues and fellows in this process.
- **Unfavourable contracts and lack of support:** Some IMGs face challenges related to their contracts, such as limited opportunities for professional development, lack of funding for necessary courses, or even a lack of institutional support for their CESR ambitions.
- **Fear of unfamiliar tasks and minimisation of ambition:** Many IMGs, especially those new to the UK, fear taking on unfamiliar tasks due to the potential consequences. This fear can lead to a minimisation of ambition, preventing them from pursuing opportunities

that could strengthen their CESR application.

Why are you still procrastinating?

If you find yourself hesitating, ask yourself what is holding you back. The Portfolio Pathway is not a shortcut; it is a legitimate and recognised route to achieving Specialist Registration in the UK. While it is demanding, it is also immensely rewarding. Every day you delay is a day lost in achieving your goals. The sooner you start, the more time you must identify gaps, gather evidence, and build a compelling portfolio. Ask yourself:

- Are you allowing fear or uncertainty to prevent you from advancing your career?
- Are you stuck in the comfort zone of your current role, afraid to challenge yourself?
- What's the worst that could happen if you start today?
- And what's the best that could happen?

How to move forward

1. **Start with self-assessment:** Review the Faculty's requirements in the ICM SSG and assess your current capabilities against them. Identify gaps in your experience and create a plan to fill those gaps.
2. **Seek guidance and mentorship:** Find mentors who have successfully completed the process. Join forums, attend workshops, and connect with others on the same journey. A good mentor can provide insights that will save you time and minimise effort.
3. **Be organised:** Document everything from day one. Keep

detailed records of all your professional activities, from clinical work to research and teaching. Use digital tools to organise your documents systematically.

4. **Prepare for challenges:** Understand that setbacks are part of the journey. Use every piece of feedback constructively and be prepared to revise and resubmit your documents. Persistence is key.
5. **Stay motivated and focused:** Keep your end goal in sight. Remind yourself regularly of why you started this journey and what you stand to gain by completing it.
6. **Devote time:** Make a habit of devoting at least a couple of hours every day to your portfolio. This routine will save you from last-minute hassles in collecting or arranging evidence.
7. **Family support:** Family support is the most important element in your success in this pathway, so don't underestimate that. Communicate openly with your loved ones about the challenges and rewards of this journey.

Take action today

The Portfolio Pathway is challenging, but it is achievable. It requires determination, hard work, and strategic planning, but the rewards are immense. If you are serious about advancing your career in the UK, stop procrastinating and start taking action today. Every step forward brings you closer to your goal. Remember, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. So I ask one last time: why are you still procrastinating? Start today – your future self will thank you.