An elective is a period of time spent away from the dental school where students can learn more about dentistry, beyond that which they have experienced in their own faculty. It can be conducted domestically, abroad, or more recently, virtually. By having a good understanding of the differences of each type of elective, students can make the best choice to suit their requirements.

Abroad
An elective abroad allows you an opportunity to travel and immerse yourself in a different culture. This can be extremely beneficial for your own personal growth, as well as the level of care that you can offer patients. In experiencing a different culture, you gain a wider understanding of patients’ needs, beyond their mouths, and how their backgrounds might impact their oral health.

‘You can observe how both private and NHS dentistry is practised’

However, there are some factors to consider when thinking about an elective abroad. Cost is a big factor, and you should consider the numerous expenses of travel,
‘COVID-19 brought about a number of changes with students having to find different ways of gaining clinical experience’

Domestic
Electives based in the UK, although not quite as exciting as travelling to distant countries that you have not experienced before, still provide invaluable learning experiences. They allow you to learn more about your own healthcare system, which is very important to be familiar with, especially as most students who complete electives will soon go onto Dental Foundation Training. You can observe how both private and NHS dentistry is practised, and note the similarities and differences between both.

Additionally, domestic electives come with an obvious reduced cost. If you choose to complete one close to your own home, you will not have to think about the large price tags attached to flights and accommodation.

Domestic electives also allow you to discover more about career paths in the UK. It can be helpful to speak to dentists who have spent their professional lives working in the UK, as they can tell you more about the options available and their own experiences.

Some disadvantages include that you would be experiencing the same culture that you are already accustomed to. Additionally, you will often encounter patient groups with needs that you are already familiar with. This is in contrast to completing an elective abroad, where you may experience patients with different needs as the prevalence of certain diseases are different from country to country.

Virtual
COVID-19 brought about a number of changes with students having to find different ways of gaining clinical experience. A virtual elective is an elective you can do from the comfort of your own home and allows you to engage with others in the field, from all around the world. This is perhaps the most convenient way to gain experience and learn more about dentistry.

The affordability is one of the big positives, along with the time saved, in making the elective accessible to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or people with other commitments who cannot spend a lot of time travelling. The format of the elective can be planned to suit the needs of the students, and target areas which are of particular interest to students. It can involve presentations from staff and students on certain topics (ranging from student societies to faculty research), breakout discussion rooms or a mixture of both.

The downside of a virtual elective is that you cannot fully immerse yourself in the experience and it is difficult to get a grasp of different cultures or approaches to dentistry. On a similar note, while there is a possibility of discussing clinical cases, the dentist-patient interactions or clinical treatments cannot be observed first-hand.

Conclusion
As you can see, there are many aspects to consider when choosing where and how you would like to do your elective. However, one advantage common to all of them is that there is always a vast amount of knowledge to be gained from each type, improving both personal and professional development, so however you choose to do it, the authors highly recommend doing one!