NAVIGATING THE NHS | MODULE 09

Building a career as a SAS doctor

Develop autonomy, evidence, leadership and professional contribution without treating SAS as a waiting room.

✓ 21 min reading

✓ Full teaching, practical next steps and reflection

✓ Six practice questions with answers and explanations

✓ Complete source list and jurisdiction notes

Prepared for SAS, locally employed and other UK doctors

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Using this module

Independent education

This is general professional information, not individual clinical, legal, employment, immigration, regulatory, tax or pensions advice. Current official instructions and the circumstances of the individual case remain controlling. Practice scores do not establish professional competence or accreditation.

The short answer

A career SAS role can be a positive and senior destination. Progression may mean deeper clinical work, a Specialist post, education, improvement, leadership, Portfolio Pathway or a better-designed job plan.

Three next actions

- Compare your written role, actual work, evidenced work and desired role.
- Use job planning and appraisal to agree no more than a few specific development outcomes.
- Build evidence as you work instead of trying to recreate years of activity later.

Learning objectives

- Distinguish Specialty Doctor, Specialist and legacy closed SAS grades.
- Use job planning, professional development and governance to build a recognised senior scope.
- Create a portfolio that supports clinical, educational, leadership or specialist-registration goals.

Understand the SAS grades and avoid treating them as one level

SAS commonly refers to Specialty Doctors, Specialist grade doctors and doctors remaining on closed legacy grades such as Associate Specialist. New appointments normally use the current Specialty Doctor or Specialist grade available in the relevant nation. These grades have different entry requirements and expected levels of responsibility. The label SAS therefore describes a career family, not one uniform scope.

A Specialty Doctor may practise with substantial autonomy within an agreed scope, but autonomy is not inferred from years of service alone. The Specialist grade is designed for experienced doctors able to undertake expert decision-making within a defined area, supported by the applicable capabilities framework and local governance. Legacy Associate Specialists retain their contractual grade but should not be made professionally invisible because the grade is closed to new entry.

- Identify the exact contract and nation.
- Separate grade from individual capability and agreed scope.
- Describe autonomy through decisions and governance, not title alone.
- Do not use 'non-consultant' as if it defined professional contribution.

Use job planning to make the whole role visible

A good job plan connects service need, patient care, workload, time, professional development and accountability. Record clinics, ward work, procedures, on-call, administration, travel, handover and predictable additional duties. Supporting professional activities or equivalent time should cover the work required for appraisal, revalidation and agreed wider contribution. Terminology and units differ by nation, so check the applicable contract.

Job planning is not merely a form completed once a year. Review material changes in activity, intensity, sites or responsibility. Bring evidence such as activity data, waiting-list contribution, teaching, improvement work and repeated unplanned workload. The aim is a deliverable and safe role, not an inflated or hidden schedule.

- Direct clinical care and associated administration.
- On-call, additional hours and predictable work outside sessions.
- Supporting professional activity and development.
- Travel and cross-site commitments.
- Objectives, resources, outcomes and review date.

Define autonomy inside a governance framework

Autonomy means being trusted and competent to make defined decisions without routine reference to another doctor; it does not mean working without accountability, collaboration or access to advice. Describe the patient group, presentations, procedures and decisions within scope, plus the situations that require referral or escalation. This makes autonomy safer and more credible.

Scope should be supported by evidence: recent practice, outcomes, audit, feedback, appraisal, credentialing or local review. When a service asks a doctor to extend scope, agree preparation, supervision, resources and review before treating the change as normal work. A workforce gap does not

itself prove competence or make governance optional.

- What you assess, diagnose, treat and discharge independently.
- Procedures or clinics managed within scope.
- Triggers for discussion, referral or transfer.
- Named peer and specialist support.
- How competence and outcomes are reviewed.

Develop beyond service delivery

SAS careers can include education, supervision, quality improvement, research, leadership and management. Ask what recognition or training is required locally for clinical or educational supervision. Seek work that addresses a real service need and has an agreed output, rather than accumulating committee attendance with no defined contribution.

Record impact. For teaching, include learner group, design, feedback and improvement. For QI, include baseline, intervention, measurement and sustainability. For leadership, show the problem, stakeholders, decision, implementation and consequence. Publications and presentations can strengthen a portfolio when they demonstrate relevant scholarship, but they are not compulsory proof of senior clinical value in every role.

- Teaching design and evaluated feedback.
- Recognised supervisory roles where available.
- Audit and improvement cycles.
- Guideline, pathway or service development.
- Research, presentation or publication.
- Team, workforce or organisational leadership.

Use the support infrastructure deliberately

Many organisations have SAS tutors, SAS advocates or leads, medical education teams and professional development funding. Their titles and authority vary. A tutor may focus on education; an advocate may address workplace experience and organisational voice. Neither replaces the line manager, clinical governance or trade-union representation.

Use appraisal to connect aspiration with an evidence plan, but do not wait for one annual meeting to raise a blocked opportunity or unsafe role. Professional colleges, specialty associations, unions and regional or national SAS networks may offer mentoring, courses, representation and role-specific advice.

- Named local SAS educational support.
- SAS advocate or workforce lead.
- Clinical director and job-plan route.
- Medical education and development funding.
- College, union and specialty network.

Design a portfolio around a destination

A portfolio becomes useful when it answers a defined future question. For a Specialist role, map evidence to the applicable generic capabilities and proposed scope. For Portfolio Pathway specialist registration, follow the GMC specialty-specific evidence requirements. For education or leadership, collect outputs and

impact relevant to those roles. One document archive can support several aims, but each route needs a distinct mapping.

Review the portfolio every six months. Remove duplicates, preserve primary evidence and identify missing domains. Ask for opportunities before the gap becomes urgent. A sustainable SAS career can remain clinically focused or combine several functions; progression should not be defined only as leaving the grade.

- Destination and eligibility.
- Required capabilities or standards.
- Current evidence and independent verification.
- Gaps, opportunity and responsible supporter.
- Target date and review point.

Common mistake

Avoid this	Do not measure progress only by movement towards consultant appointment. A developed SAS career is not failed training; it should still offer accurate scope, recognition, growth and influence.

Pause and reflect

Does your current job plan represent the work and senior responsibility you actually carry, and what evidence would support a more accurate discussion?

Takeaways

- SAS covers distinct grades and individual scopes rather than one level of doctor.
- Job planning and governance make contribution, autonomy and development visible.
- Build evidence against a chosen destination while recognising a senior SAS career as valuable in itself.

Knowledge check

Choose one best answer. These practice questions support reflection; they do not assess a real case or confer accreditation. Answer positions match the browser edition.

1. Does SAS describe one standard level of autonomy?

A. Only for Associate Specialists.

B. No; grades, experience and agreed scopes vary.

C. Only in England.

D. Yes.

2. What should a job plan make visible?

A. Personal ambition without service objectives.

B. The whole predictable role, including clinical work, administration, on-call, travel and professional activity.

C. Annual leave only.

D. Clinics only.

3. Which description best demonstrates autonomy?

A. I work alone.

B. I independently manage defined presentations and decisions, with stated escalation boundaries and outcome review.

C. No one checks my work.

D. I have many years of service.

4. Which is strongest leadership evidence?

A. A title.

B. A problem addressed through stakeholders, action, outcome and learning.

C. Being asked for advice.

D. Meeting attendance.

5. Who replaces clinical governance for an SAS doctor?

A. The SAS tutor.

B. The SAS advocate.

C. No one; support roles complement but do not replace governance and management.

D. A professional network.

6. What makes a portfolio efficient?

A. Keeping only certificates.

B. Mapping primary evidence to a specific route or capability requirement.

C. Reviewing it once at retirement.

D. Uploading everything.

Answers and explanations

1. B — No; grades, experience and agreed scopes vary.

SAS is a family of grades and scopes.

Identify your exact grade, contract and agreed scope.

2. B — The whole predictable role, including clinical work, administration, on-call, travel and professional activity.

A safe plan accounts for the work required to deliver the role.

Keep a short prospective diary of all predictable work.

3. B — I independently manage defined presentations and decisions, with stated escalation boundaries and outcome review.

Autonomy is defined, evidenced and governed.

Write a scope statement with decisions and escalation triggers.

4. B — A problem addressed through stakeholders, action, outcome and learning.

Impact demonstrates leadership more clearly than position alone.

Convert one activity into a purpose-action-impact record.

5. C — No one; support roles complement but do not replace governance and management.

Support infrastructure has distinct functions and limits.

Map who owns education, employment, governance and representation locally.

6. B — Mapping primary evidence to a specific route or capability requirement.

Purposeful mapping shows relevance and reveals gaps.

Choose one destination and complete a gap analysis.

Official and professional sources

Confirm the current source version and applicable nation, contract, scheme or specialty. A source list is not a statement that every rule applies to every reader.

NHS Employers: SAS resources
UK / nation-specific · https://www.nhsemployers.org/sas

BMA: SAS contracts
UK / nation-specific · https://www.bma.org.uk/pay-and-contracts/contracts/sas-doctor-contract

HEIW: SAS doctors in Wales
UK / nation-specific · https://heiw.nhs.wales/education-training/a-z/sas-doctors/

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