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Addressing the UK's sonographer shortage through new initiatives higher education: Evaluating the perspectives of ultrasound unit managers

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Background: Over the last decade, progressively fewer available posts in UK sonography have been filled\(^1\).\(^2\). As such, interventions in higher education (HE) to attract new blood have become a matter of increasing interest for medical imaging research\(^3\).\(^4\). While this corpus of literature has produced a range of actionable findings to date, the views of employers in clinical ultrasound around how the issue might be addressed in HE have remained largely un researched.

Methods: Three models of ultrasound education were proposed to N=20 ultrasound department leads in public (n=17) and private (n=3) units:

1. The direct entry undergraduate model (DEUM);
2. The direct entry postgraduate model (DEPM); and
3. The 3+1 postgraduate model (31PM).

Participants were encouraged to express a preference, reasons for their preference, and which components of each model were desirable/undesirable. Using a Straussian model of Grounded Theory\(^5\).\(^6\), the extended accounts provided were analysed.

Results: Of the participants, n=9 indicated a sole preference for the DEPM, while n=3 indicated a sole preference for the 31PM. However, n=8 found variable strengths/weaknesses in each. Qualitative concerns thematicised as:

1. The feed of undergraduate entry programmes into extant pay banding.
2. A lack of life, communication and time management skills synonymous with younger graduates.
3. Sustaining the current quality of sonographers without a prior background in plain radiography.
4. Condensing ultrasound learning into too brief a period.

Conclusions: There is no simple solution in HE to the sonographer shortage. Unit managers’ perspectives add depth to our understanding of what might be required.