

Mawson, Julie and Miller, Paul K. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5611-1354> (2024) Bridging the gap: understanding why assistant practitioners choose a radiography UDip pathway. In: UK Imaging and Oncology Congress 2024 (UKIO 2024): Vision and values: Putting people first, 10-12 June 2024, Liverpool ACC, UK. (Unpublished)

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Bridging the gap: Understanding why assistant practitioners choose a radiography UDip pathway

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Background

Assistant Practitioners (APs) undertake a vital role in many X-ray departments, supporting qualified radiographers by undertaking a limited range of radiographic procedures specified by the College of Radiographers (2022). Many APs have undertaken their current role for a number of years and carry out many similar roles to that of a qualified radiographer.

Limitations to their clinical scope of practice, however, prevents them from progressing further beyond their AP qualification, and necessary supervision in many areas limits their autonomy as a health care practitioner. Many clinical responsibilities, higher level technical skills and decision-making skills remain the role of the qualified radiographer, and APs who wish to progress to such qualified status would have to return to university and embark on a full three-year undergraduate degree which comes with significant financial commitments.

An apprenticeship in Radiography allows an alternative route to qualified radiographer status and in turn, HCPC registration. This work-based route ensures that the student remains employed, whilst fees are accounted for by the apprenticeship levy. The UDip Radiography Assistant Practitioner bridging course is consequently designed to allow current APs to emulate the level of educational and clinical attainment of a BSc. Diagnostic Radiography student finishing their second undergraduate year. This is with a view to the AP then progressing into the third year of the BSc programme and ultimately qualifying as a fully-registered radiographer.

Little is known, however, about UDip registrants' rationales for choosing to bridge this gap between AP and qualified radiographer. This exploratory paper therefore qualitatively reports detailed self-reflections on pathways taken and choices made by APs in the early stages of a recently validated UDip programme at a single UK university.

Methods

With institutional ethical approval, semi-structured interviews were conducted with N=6 UDip registrants (f=4; m=2). All were fully qualified APs, working in five NHS Trusts, with an experience range of 2-18 years as an AP. The interview schedule was organised around the following issues: rationale for applying, length of time qualified, scope of practice, autonomy and responsibility, knowledge and skills, the current status of the NHS, return to study, and impact on life. The mean interview duration was 32 minutes, and all transcribed data were investigated in line with the Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021).

Results

Analysis revealed four global themes. These are schematised in Figure 1 and evidenced in Table 1 (opposite).

Figure 1: Thematic analysis summary

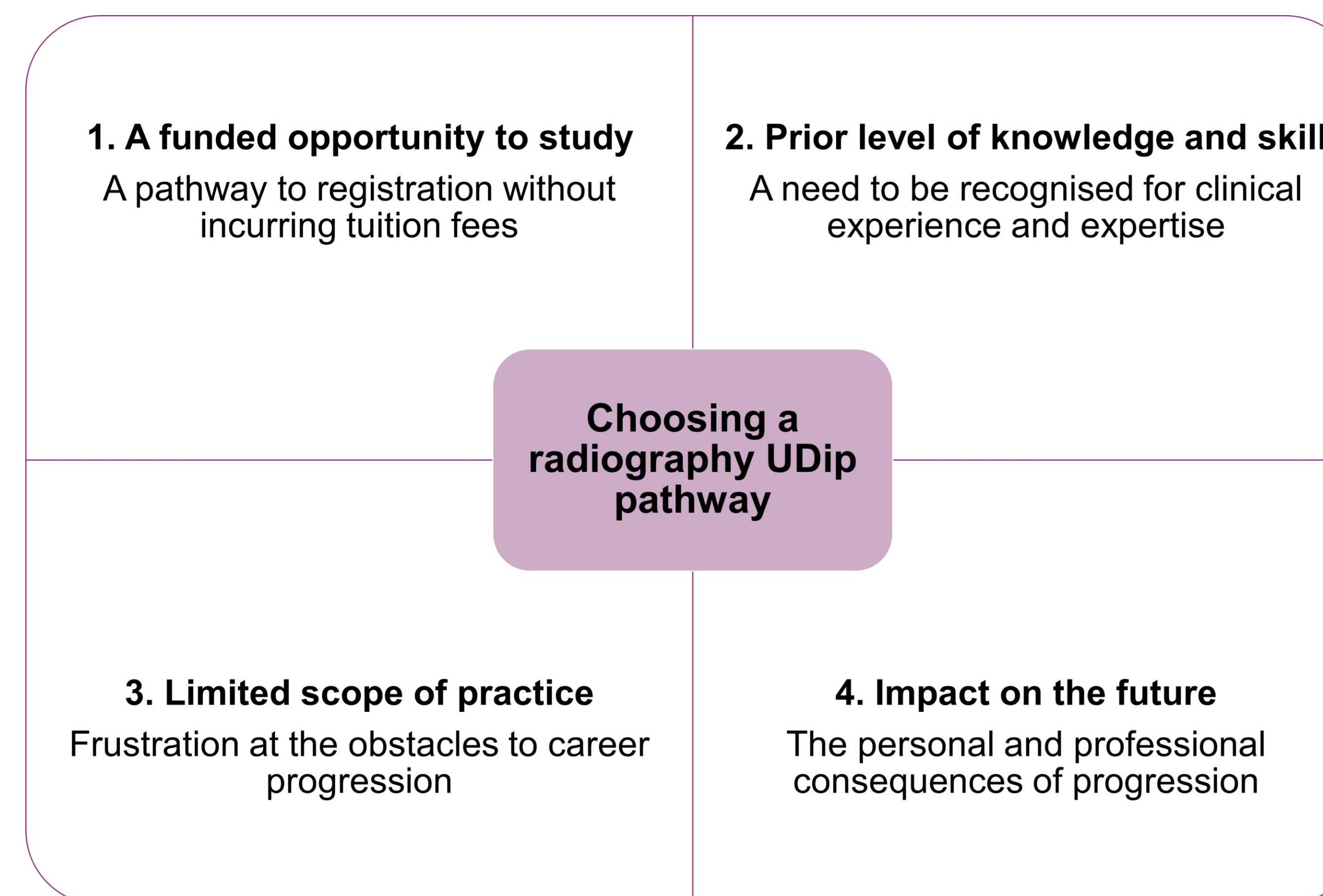


Table 1: Key evidence

1. P3: "I'd have to self-fund yeah, and I wouldn't have ever done it. Because as an AP there's nowhere else for you to go without going back to formal education. I've got commitments you know, children, a home. When you're an AP, the money's not great so and we've all got families so that kind of factored into it massively. I'm not going to come out with any debt, so it's win-win."
2. P4: "I am doing the work of a band 5 but not getting the recognition. It's down to the fact that I have been qualified so long. I've been there longer than the manager. Everyone has progressed except me. I remain the band 4. There's people being born right now that I'll end up training when they are 20. I just don't think that is right."
3. P2: "Being up against that glass ceiling for so long, you get a bit disparaged by it because there is nowhere to go."
P4: "I felt very frustrated that my work was so limited, I couldn't help in the areas that I wanted to help."
P5: "[I've been] kinda stuck in a rut; there's no progression as an AP."
4. P1: "At the moment we've got two scanners. and a lot of the times only one of the scanners is in operation because there isn't enough staff. It's just when the flow of patients it's held up and you've got your waiting times in A&E or higher, you kind of feel that frustration then."
P3: "It's just opened up so many avenues for me, it's very exciting. It's gonna give me the opportunities to develop my skills further and go into specialist roles, widen that skill set."

Discussion

Participants noted how the bridging course could impact positively on their futures, both personally and professionally. Regarding the latter, they particularly highlighted how undertaking the apprenticeship could allow them to help with the current staff shortages in the NHS. There is no paucity of evidence regarding this understaffing, its impact on diagnostic services (Beardmore, Woznitza and Goodman 2016), and how a lack of novel academic training programmes (and fewer entrants to the profession) are a contributor (Konstantinidis 2023) to this situation. Alongside cited benefits for clinical departments, participants found tangible the value in the UDip in terms of allowing them to move forward in their careers following many years of waiting (and often frustration), without the financial baggage of a full degree. Snaith, Harris and Palmer (2018) detail clear frustrations from many APs at the time over the lack of over career prospects. The potential to move into different areas of radiography and an increase in opportunity on the career ladder were welcomed by participants. Snaith, Harris and Palmer (2018) further echo this, maintaining that increasing the autonomy among APs should have a positive effect on the workforce, and possibly raise job satisfaction.

Conclusions

It is contended that the findings provide a stronger understanding of UDip registrants' backgrounds and motivations, and the links between them, and will help to more effectively tailor pedagogical provision and personal tuition in the future.

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