

1. Introduction

This document presents an analysis of an online survey in September 2009 of NHS ultrasound departments in the UK. The aim of the survey was to gather information on the recruitment, training and retention of the ultrasound workforce. Department managers were asked about staffing levels in their departments and associated information.

The SoR emailed as many managers in NHS ultrasound departments as possible asking them to participate in the survey. The survey was also circulated to SoR representatives in ultrasound departments and publicised in the monthly e-zine Top Talk. 45 complete responses were received from across the UK. We estimate that this is over 20% of ultrasound departments in the UK and, therefore, forms a useful sample.

2. Profile of departments responding to survey

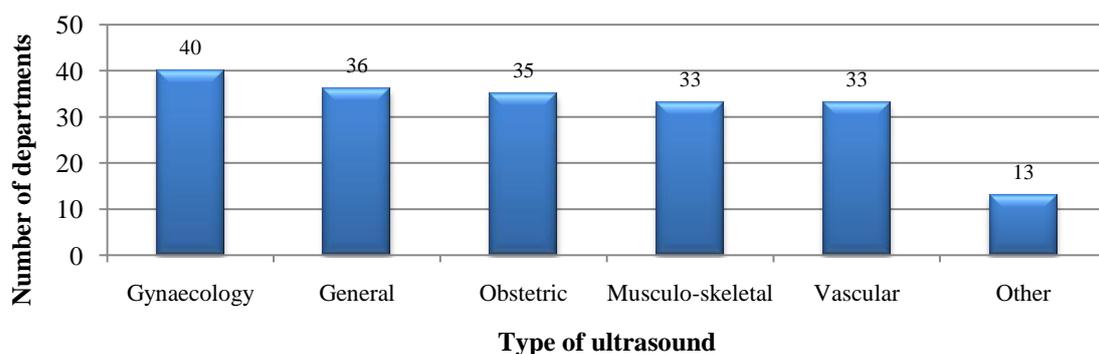
In the NHS year 2008/09, the number of examinations in the 45 departments responding to the survey ranged widely from 1,463 to 98,000 and had increased on average by 1,848 (7.9%) since the previous year. Most departments stated that the nominal time per examination had not changed over that year.

The table and graph below illustrate that responses were received from ultrasound departments across the UK, each generally performing more than one type of ultrasound.

Geographical spread of departments responding to survey

Country / Region	Number of departments responding	Percentage of all departments responding
• East of England	3	6.7%
• East Midlands	1	2.2%
• London	4	8.9%
• North East	6	13.3%
• North West	4	8.9%
• Northern Ireland	2	4.4%
• Scotland	5	11.1%
• South East	6	13.3%
• South West	6	13.3%
• Wales	1	2.2%
• West Midlands	4	8.9%
• Yorkshire and the Humber	3	6.7%

Types of ultrasound performed



3. Assistant practitioners

Assistant practitioners are employed in six (13.3%) of the ultrasound departments responding to the survey. One of these departments dominates the statistics in the table below as it employs 16 of the 30 assistant practitioners recorded in the survey.

Assistant practitioners in ultrasound

	Total from 6 responding departments employing assistant practitioners
• Number of assistant practitioners employed in ultrasound (headcount)	30
• Number of assistant practitioners employed in ultrasound (WTE)	24
• Number of assistant practitioners actively scanning (headcount) ¹	0

4. Sonographer training posts

Just over half the departments responding to the survey have sonographer training posts, with 7 out of the 57 available training posts unfilled.

Sonographer training posts

	Total from all 26 responding departments with training posts
• Number of sonographer training posts (headcount)	57
• Number of these sonographer training posts currently not filled (headcount)	7
• Percentage of sonographer training posts not filled	12.3%

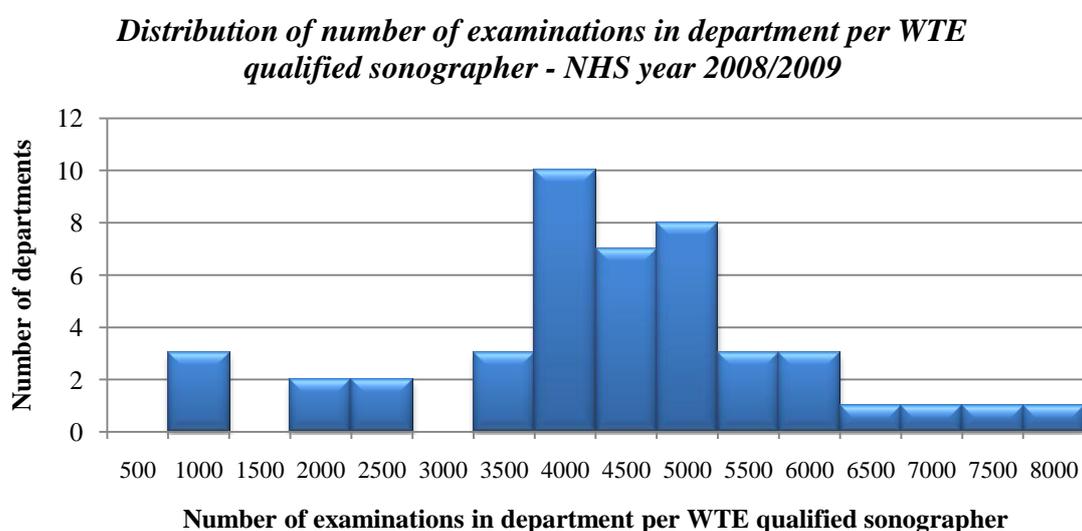
¹ Assistant Practitioners in ultrasound have their role defined in the document: 'The Scope of Practice of Assistant Practitioners in Ultrasound'. This is available online to SCoR members at <http://doc-lib.sor.org/>.

5. Qualified sonographers

5.1 Staffing levels

The number of qualified sonographers employed in each department ranged widely from 1 (0.4 WTE) to 25 (16.6 WTE). The overall headcount across the 45 departments was 375 (271.9 WTE) qualified sonographers. Two thirds of departments responding to the survey expect to employ more qualified sonographers over the next two years, with only 2 departments believing that their number of qualified sonographers will diminish.

The graph below shows examinations carried out in a year per WTE qualified sonographer in each department. The figures do not allow for vacancy rates or for examinations carried out by radiologists, so the figures do not represent the number of examinations that can be carried out by each qualified sonographer each year. However, it does demonstrate that the average department is currently employing one WTE qualified sonographer for around every 4,250 examinations per year.



5.2 Vacancies

Slightly under half of the departments responding to the survey currently have vacancies, with 12 of these departments stating that the vacancies in their department had lasted on average for more than six months. The number of vacancies as a percentage of the total number of qualified sonographers in all responding departments is 10.1% (headcount) and 11.7% (WTE).

Total number of qualified sonographer vacancies in responding departments

	Qualified sonographer vacancies	Percentage of total number of qualified sonographers in responding departments
• Headcount	38	10.1%
• Whole Time Equivalent (WTE)	31.7	11.7%

5.3 Overseas recruitment

Eight departments (17.8%) had recruited sonographers from overseas in the past two years from various countries (see the table below). Six departments (13.3%) thought they were likely to recruit from overseas in the next two years.

Countries recruited from in the last two years

Country	Number of departments recruiting from that country
• Australia	2
• Canada	1
• Egypt	1
• India	2
• South Africa	5
• Venezuela	1

5.4 Retirement

One third of the qualified sonographers in the departments responding to the survey are due to retire within the next ten years.

Forecast retirement of qualified sonographers over next ten years

How many qualified sonographers are due to retire ...	Total headcount	Percentage of total number of qualified sonographers in responding departments
• within the next 1 – 2 years	21	5.6%
• within the next 3 – 5 years	32	8.5%
• within the next 6 – 10 years	72	19.2%
• TOTAL in the next 10 years	125	33.3%

5.5 Musculo-Skeletal Disorders (MSDs)

Only seven departments responding to the survey report no MSDs among the staff groups concerned. Overall 28.3% of the qualified sonographers from the responding departments suffer from MSDs.

However, there is a positive note from one of the seven MSD-free departments: “*Since we have gone to an extended working day working with a tandem arrangement for the sonographers, they are now scanning less patients per day, mostly now scanning every other patient on the list and also only scanning 4 days a week WTE, MSK problems have disappeared.*”

Prevalence of MSDs

Staff group	Number with MSDs	Percentage of total number of that staff group in responding departments
• Assistant practitioners working in ultrasound	0	0
• Training sonographers	3	6.0%
• Qualified sonographers	106	28.3%

6. Comments

Managers responding on behalf of their departments had the opportunity to submit general comments relating to the recruitment, training and retention of the ultrasound workforce. A number of themes were raised by more than one manager and are listed in the table below. The most frequent issues cited were the difficulty recruiting staff and concern over MSDs.

Analysis of free text comments from respondents

Theme raised by more than one respondent	Number of respondents	Illustrative comment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty recruiting staff 	12	<i>“We have advertised a Lead Practitioner post several times over the last 2 years with no applicants.”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MSDs are a problem 	7	<i>“RSI is a major issue and will only get worse due to staff shortages and increasing workloads.”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No staffing problems 	5	<i>“We have no problem in any area. The staff are happy, fulfilled and well supported. We have a very low turnover. Usually posts become vacant due to retirement.”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiting time targets increase pressure 	5	<i>“Waiting time targets make it difficult to accommodate training posts”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retention not a problem 	5	<i>“We have no problems with retention in the department”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No progression beyond band 7 	4	<i>“For the responsibility and skills a sonographer has to have the banding is wrong. The trainee sonographer should be at Band 7, qualified sonographer at Band 8a.”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of funding for training for sonographers 	4	<i>“Funding for training is an issue”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backfill for radiographers to train as sonographers 	4	<i>“Unable to get backfill for the post, to the detriment of the x-ray side of the department.”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting training puts pressure on department 	3	<i>“The ultrasound lists are too busy to be able to spend adequate amounts of time training people to a good standard whilst trying to maintain waiting lists.”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider direct entry access to the profession by degree & preceptorship 	3	<i>“I believe that a direct entry ultrasound degree should be offered with a 4th year preceptorship in clinical practice at band 5/6 and the PGDip awarded at the end of this year (providing requirements are met).”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency sonographers paid more 	2	<i>“Agency sonographers are paid more hence staff moral down.”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not valued as a professional group 	2	<i>“Not valued as a professional group even though most times they work and report to the standard required of a radiologist, obstetrician and or a gynaecologist.”</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scanning also undertaken by radiologists 	2	<i>“A significant amount of scanning is also undertaken by the radiologists.”</i>