

Society of Radiographers

Ultrasound training, employment, registration and professional indemnity insurance

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1. Introduction

The Society of Radiographers (SoR) receives many enquiries that relate to ultrasound training, employment, registration and professional indemnity insurance. Many of these enquiries are from sonographers who trained overseas and would like to work in the United Kingdom (UK) or undertake further training in the UK. It is hoped that the following will answer many of the more common queries.

2. Education and training

Medical ultrasound is usually taught at postgraduate level in the UK, with many sonographers having come from a healthcare background, such as radiography or midwifery.

Most ultrasound courses in the UK are accredited by the Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education (CASE)¹. Courses typically last between 12 and 18 months, and lead to a postgraduate certificate (PGC) or diploma (PGD). Courses may offer day release or block release patterns of study depending on the individual institution. There are approximately 18 universities and colleges offering CASE-accredited ultrasound courses in the UK. Entry requirements usually include a healthcare-related undergraduate degree in radiography, midwifery or a similar science or health-related subject, and confirmation of good access to supervised clinical ultrasound practice.

There are currently two universities running a 'direct entry' CASE accredited full time MSc programme for applicants holding a primary degree in a relevant subject. The universities can advise further on what is acceptable for their particular programme. Details are in the CASE directory.

CASE also accredits shorter, focused courses that allow, for example, a midwife to train specifically in third trimester fetal biometry techniques or a nurse to train in ultrasound techniques that are applicable to work in a fertility unit. These courses must meet certain criteria and are developed by individual universities and colleges².

An undergraduate course (BSc Hons) in medical ultrasound has recently been developed by Birmingham City University. Applications for the course can be made via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)³. An integrated (BSc) Hons apprenticeship in sonography has also been approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education⁴. If also accredited by CASE, such courses and routes will be listed in the CASE course directory².

All CASE-accredited ultrasound education and training must include a clinical placement that has been approved by the university or college responsible. These placements can be difficult to find and are often specifically arranged by trusts or health boards for existing employees. The SCoR cannot help with obtaining clinical placements. Individual universities and colleges will help if they can, but often cannot be of direct assistance due to a general shortage of clinical placements. Student sonographer vacancies are sometimes advertised on the NHS Jobs website⁵.

There are many short courses and study days in ultrasound that are run by professional bodies and organisations such as the SoR, The Royal College of Radiologists, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the British Medical Ultrasound Society. These do not usually carry any formal qualification or award, although they may contribute to an individual's continuing professional development. Details can be found on the websites of the organisations concerned.

For those who are medically qualified and are registered with the General Medical Council as a doctor with a licence to practise, the Royal College of Radiologists has published a document entitled *Ultrasound training recommendations for medical and surgical specialties*, which is available from its website⁶.

There is no formal system by which ultrasound qualifications obtained outside the UK can be compared with the UK's awards. A body exists (UK NARIC)⁷ that may be able to advise with regards to the academic level, but it cannot help with the clinical aspect of training.

3. Employment

If you hold a qualification in ultrasound, whether awarded in the UK or overseas, it will be necessary to apply directly to a potential employer. You will be likely to need to demonstrate to a potential employer that your qualifications and experience are equivalent to those of a sonographer who trained in the UK and who holds a CASE-accredited award.

There is currently a shortage of sonographers in the UK, and sonography is listed as a shortage specialty in a review by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC)⁸.

Vacancies in the NHS are advertised on the NHS Jobs website⁵. Search terms such as 'sonographer' and 'ultrasonographer' should be used to find relevant vacancies.

Companies providing independent ultrasound services in the UK can be found via the SoR website, the SoR publication *Synergy News*, the British Medical Ultrasound Society (BMUS) or via an internet search. There are also several agencies that employ qualified sonographers, which can be found via the aforementioned routes.

The SoR is neither an agency nor an employer and cannot directly help with regards to employment.

If you are from overseas and have any contacts in the UK working within ultrasound, this can be of great help. Your country's embassy, for example, may be able to put you in contact with sonographers from your own country who are already working in the UK.

4. Registration and advice to service managers

There is often confusion between a professional body and a statutory regulator. The Society of Radiographers is a professional body, not a statutory regulator. Examples of statutory regulators are the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), and the General Medical Council (GMC). These provide statutory registration for their registrants. In the UK, for example, it is a statutory (legal) requirement to be registered with the HCPC to work as a radiographer.

There is often also confusion between the terms 'membership' and 'registration'. A sonographer can be a **member** of a professional body or scientific society and also be **registered** with a regulatory body.

There is, however, no legal requirement for sonographers to be registered with a statutory regulator, such as the HCPC or the NMC. Sonography is not a regulated profession and 'sonographer' and 'ultrasonographer' are not protected titles. Many employers prefer their sonographers to be statutorily registered, but for some otherwise very well-qualified sonographers it is an impossibility. The HCPC, for example, cannot register a sonographer unless they meet the standards for one of the professions regulated by the HCPC, such as radiography. A further example would be a sonographer who has trained overseas and may be very well qualified and competent but not meet the registration requirements of the HCPC or NMC. Similarly, sonographers who completed a UK scientific or other undergraduate degree are unable to register with the HCPC.

NHS Employers has published advice relating to registration for sonographers on its website⁹.

The SoR expects those of its members who are able to register with a statutory regulator such as the HCPC or the NMC to do so, but recognises that for some, through no fault of their own, this will not be achievable. We are aware of a number of organisations in which well-qualified, non-statutorily registered sonographers are employed as advanced practitioner sonographers and are working very effectively, with their expertise highly regarded.

If you trained as a medical doctor overseas, it would be worthwhile seeing if you are eligible for registration with the GMC and able to obtain a licence to practise; you can then apply for employment via a medical route. If you wish to work as a non-medically qualified sonographer then you will not need to register with the GMC.

In the absence of statutory registration for sonographers, departments may wish to consider applicants for sonography posts who are unable to gain statutory registration but are otherwise well qualified, in line with local Human Resources policy. Clearly the normal checks that an employer must perform on the background, English language proficiency and likely competence of an employee need to be carried out before any offer of employment is made. The comparative standard of qualification is a UK postgraduate certificate or diploma in medical ultrasound that has been accredited by CASE. There is, however, no simple way to compare ultrasound qualifications from different countries, and each applicant will need

to be assessed on their merits. English language proficiency requirements can be compared with HCPC¹⁰ or NMC requirements.¹¹ Sonographers may apply to be registered on the Professional Standards Authority accredited (voluntary) Register of Clinical Technologists (RCT)¹² although this is not a *legal* requirement. The RCT replaced the Public Voluntary Register of Sonographers which was run by the College of Radiographers and closed at the end of February 2021. See Appendix.

Sonographers who are not statutorily registered face the following legal restrictions:

- i) They cannot act under patient group directions (PGD)¹³ for the administration of drugs and medicines and cannot train to become supplementary prescribers. They are allowed to act under patient specific directions, but employers requiring them to act under these directions must ensure they are competent to do so safely.
- ii) They cannot act as a referrer for clinical imaging examinations involving the use of ionising radiation. A sonographer who **is** statutorily registered may be entitled by their employer to act as referrer under the Ionising Radiation (Medical Exposure) Regulations 2017¹⁴. Such an entitlement should be in writing and is usually linked to a scope of practice.

Following the exit of the UK from the European Union (EU), specific application routes for EU or European Economic Area (EEA) citizens to the Health and Care Professions Council (as a radiographer)¹⁵ and other statutory regulators, such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council, will no longer apply. All new applications are likely to follow the appropriate statutory regulator's international route.

5. Professional indemnity insurance

In 2014 the government introduced legislation that requires those professionals who hold statutory registration (except social workers) to hold professional indemnity insurance (PII). This legislation became effective on 1 April 2015.

Full advice (including frequently asked questions) is provided on the HCPC website¹⁶.

The equivalent NMC advice can be found on the NMC website¹⁷.

In most cases the requirement for PII will be met by working in an employed environment (ie with a contract of employment), but sonographers are advised to read the advice given by the HCPC and/or NMC, as appropriate. It is particularly important to establish your PII situation if you are statutorily registered and self-employed, working as a contractor, for an agency or work on a part self-employed/part employed basis.

If you are not statutorily registered it is still strongly recommended that you ensure you have PII available to you, as outlined above. It may also be a condition of voluntary registration when you initially apply or renew.

Professional indemnity insurance can be obtained via membership of professional bodies or from commercial insurers as well as via an employed environment. It is important to confirm all terms and conditions that apply. The Society of Radiographer's Professional Indemnity Insurance for example is *secondary* indemnity insurance only.

It is important to note that there is **no** PII provided by the action of registering with the HCPC or NMC. The requirement is to make a professional declaration at first application for registration, or at renewal, that PII is sought in conjunction with the registration.

There is also **no** PII provided by the action of successfully applying to join the Register of Clinical Technologists or of being listed on the register.

You can contact SoR with any questions or comments about the issues raised in this document via our website, using the link <https://www.sor.org/contact-us>.

6. References

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16. Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Professional indemnity. Available at: <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/registration/your-registration/legal-guidelines/professional-indemnity/>. Accessed: 10 February 2021.
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APPENDIX

Regulation of Sonographers- Professional Standards Authority report, February 2019

In February 2019 the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care (PSA) reported to Health Education England on the regulation of sonographers¹. The PSA did not recommend statutory registration for sonographers but recognised that this situation may change in the future. The report recommended that the Public Voluntary Register of Sonographers (PVRs), as managed by the College of Radiographers at the time of the report, transfer to a PSA-accredited voluntary register. Since 1 March 2021 new applications for voluntary registration as a sonographer can be made to the Register of Clinical Technologists (RCT), to which sonographers listed on the PVRs transferred when it closed on 28 February 2021. The SoR, along with the British Medical Ultrasound Society, CASE, the Royal College of Radiologists and other stakeholders, will continue to lobby for sonographers to become statutorily registered. Voluntary registration is limited in the extent to which it can protect the public when compared with statutory registration.

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