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Recruitment of sonographers without a CASE accredited award: Guidance for employers

Society of Radiographers and British Medical Ultrasound Society

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Introduction

Sonographers with international qualifications or non-CASE accredited awards make valuable contributions to the UK sonographer workforce. Following a survey from the British Medical Ultrasound Society (BMUS) and the Society of Radiographers (SoR), it was clear that employers wanted advice on recruiting sonographers who did not hold a [Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education](#) (CASE) accredited ultrasound qualification.

This guidance document aims to assist ultrasound teams and recruiters in the recruitment and preceptorship of sonographers without a CASE accredited award by referring to relevant information. It does not replace good recruitment and selection processes currently in place locally. Local decisions regarding employment are the responsibility of the employing organisation.

The document should be reviewed in conjunction with government guidance and the SoR, Royal College of Midwives (RCM) and Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) guidance document [Supporting International Recruitment – Principles & Standards](#).¹

1. Ethical recruitment

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) provides advice specifically relating to international recruitment into health and social care roles in England.² This includes details of red and amber list countries where active recruitment is not permitted (red list) or is permitted only if government agreements are observed (amber list).

2. English language proficiency

For entry to the [Register of Clinical Technologists](#) (RCT), sonographers have to meet the minimum requirements for English language proficiency. It is strongly recommended that employers mirror this requirement and that of the Health and Care Professions Council ([HCPC](#)), e.g.

International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

- an overall score of at least 7
- no element of reading, speaking, listening or writing below 6.5

Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet Based Test (TOEFL iBT)

- minimum score of 100/120

[The UK Government](#) provides advice on which countries' students applying for a visa do not require proof of English language proficiency, if they have completed a "qualification equivalent to a degree".³

3. UK ENIC qualification academic level

The European (non-EU) National Information Centre (UK ENIC) provides guidance on the academic level of an award by giving a statement of comparability. UK ENIC provides guidance only on academic level, not on curriculum content or clinical competency assessment:

This service does not provide a comment on grades, grade comparisons, or the subjects studied.⁴

Qualification levels are available on the [UK Government website](#).⁵

UK ENIC can be used to demonstrate the level of award but does not offer any detail about the curriculum content, comparability to a CASE accredited award and CASE [Standards for Sonographic Education](#),⁶ or clinical competency and assessment.

UK-qualified sonographers who have successfully completed a CASE accredited ultrasound qualification hold either a BSc (Hons) (Frameworks for Higher Education (FHEQ) education level 6 or Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 10 in Scotland) or a postgraduate qualification (FHEQ education level 7 or SCQF level 11 in Scotland).

NOTE: UK education levels are entirely unrelated to NHS Agenda for Change (AfC) pay scales. AfC pay bandings are determined based on local job evaluation.

Which awards are of comparable academic level to the UK qualifications?

- honours degree, e.g. BSc (Hons)
- postgraduate (Pg) level award, e.g. Pg certificate, Pg diploma, Master's degree, which can be checked with [UK ENIC](#): these can be compared with the level of award in the UK

Which awards are of a lower academic level than a UK qualification in ultrasound for entry to the RCT register or radiography leading to HCPC registration?

An award equivalent to:

- certificate (CertHE)
- diploma in higher education (DipHE)
- ordinary degree (BSc)

4. Ultrasound qualifications

Currently, there is no easy way to compare qualifications with CASE accredited awards, as many courses change and develop over time. Ultrasound programmes can also vary greatly within and between countries. Some advice is provided in this section.

4.1 *Ultrasound qualification and clinical competency*

A prospective employer needs to check the ultrasound qualification of a sonographer, particularly if they do not hold a CASE accredited award. Some things to consider include:

- **Course length.** Most UK CASE accredited programmes take 9–12 months to complete a PgCert for health care professionals or others already holding an academic level 6 Bachelor's (Hons) degree. Anything less than this may be a focused course, which would not be the equivalent of a CASE accredited programme leading to eligibility to register with the RCT.
- **Course title.** Was the course an ultrasound-specific qualification or part of a radiography degree or other degree course? If part of a radiography or other degree, did it lead to clinical competence in ultrasound and, if so, in which clinical areas?

- **Course content.** CASE would expect to see a range of clinical cases relevant to the specific clinical modules completed, in addition to topics including fundamental ultrasound physics, ultrasound safety, audit, professional issues, report writing, health and safety, and communication.
- **Academic assessment methods.** What assessment methods were used to assess knowledge and application to clinical practice? Did the assessments include elements of critical reasoning or were they all rote learning?
- **Clinical experience.** What clinical experience was gained during the course, how much time was spent scanning under supervision, and were there minimum numbers or time covering the relevant range of clinical cases for the clinical component of the course?
- **Clinical competency assessment.** Was clinical competency assessed as part of the award? Did the competency assessment cover a range of clinical cases, how was it assessed, and by whom? Check that the clinical assessments were rigorous and assessed to a similar standard as CASE accredited awards. If not, the candidate is likely to need additional support and/or competency assessment prior to employment or as a new starter. Consider in advance how this can be managed practically in your department.
- **Report writing.** What level of ultrasound report writing was taught and assessed during the qualification, e.g. independent actionable reports, descriptive reports, checklist reporting?
- **Advice.** Are you able to contact the awarding body for confirmation and/or advice on course content, assessment and candidate references?
- **Advice or references.** If the candidate is newly qualified, are you able to contact their clinical placement for advice or references?
- **Post-qualification clinical experience.** Has the sonographer worked clinically in the relevant areas of ultrasound practice after achieving their qualification, to ensure currency of clinical experience?

4.2 *CASE equivalence*

Educational qualifications need to be mapped to CASE learning outcomes, which are published in the CASE [Standards for Sonographic Education](#).⁶ CASE provides some guidance for determining programme equivalence.⁷

Employers have a duty to ensure that the sonographer has education at a similar level to that provided by CASE accredited programmes and/or put in place a process to identify potential gaps in knowledge, skills and competencies with associated academic and/or clinical support to enable the sonographer to achieve equivalent competency to provide a safe service. Candidates without a CASE accredited award should be forewarned that they will need to supply programme transcripts and syllabus details.

Some international radiography courses offer ultrasound training as part of the BSc radiography programme. The level of qualification needs to be carefully assessed, in addition to the ultrasound content, as a certificate or diploma in higher education and ordinary degree are all less than the entry requirements for radiographers or sonographers in the UK.

BSc (Hons), postgraduate certificate, diploma and MSc in ultrasound are common qualifications. The curriculum content needs to be carefully assessed to see whether it meets CASE learning outcomes and is similar to that offered by a CASE accredited programme. Applicants should provide detailed curricula and information about the range of clinical experience, learning, teaching and assessment methods, including clinical assessments and the amount of time devoted to each area of learning and clinical practice.

Anyone looking to recruit someone with non-CASE accredited or international qualifications should consider the time spent in each area of practice, the range of clinical cases, the type of workload completed, the report writing practice and the relevance of workload to UK screening programme standards and evidence-based guidelines. In some cases, it might be appropriate to contact the education provider to obtain further information about the course content and approach.

The SoR advises that:

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.⁸

4.3 *Recognition of prior learning (RPL)*

CASE accredited programmes do not allow for remote attendance from international learners at the present time, unless the RPL process has been used.

Some CASE accredited programmes will enable RPL or accreditation of prior learning from those without CASE accredited ultrasound awards from both UK and internationally qualified sonographers, to enable a sonographer to complete a Master's-level award in the UK. Some non-CASE accredited awards do not include formal assessment of clinical competence, which is a requirement of CASE accredited programmes. Furthermore, candidates (UK and international) without CASE accredited awards who enrol on CASE accredited courses via RPL may not be required to undergo a final clinical competency assessment. It is the employer's responsibility to determine with the UK university which modules have been accepted via the RPL route and what that means in terms of final assessment and clinical competence.

Clinical managers are advised to engage directly with the UK university ultrasound programme lead and discuss the requirements of the international candidate before their enrolment on the course, thus ensuring clarity and understanding on both sides.

5. Sonographer professional registration

5.1 *UK professional registration*

Some sonographers will be eligible for statutory professional registration with a regulatory body such as the HCPC. Others will not be eligible for statutory registration and employers should encourage these practitioners to apply to join the RCT, as recommended by the [Professional Standards Authority](#).⁹

- **HCPC registration** demonstrates that the HCPC believes that someone has met the HCPC standards to register as a professional, such as a diagnostic radiographer. It does **not** imply any ultrasound qualification or competency.
- **RCT registration** demonstrates that the RCT believes someone working as a sonographer, or with a job offer to work as a sonographer, has either achieved a CASE accredited award or that their ultrasound qualifications and experience are such that they can register as a sonographer.

5.2 *International registration*

Some sonographers with international qualifications will have international registration such as [American Registry for Diagnostic Medical Sonography](#) (ARDMS) or [Australian Sonographer Accreditation Registry](#) (ASAR).

The ARDMS has a process, which enables a “sponsoring sonographer” or “reporting physician” to verify directly observed core clinical competency in 12 areas.¹⁰ Recruiting managers need to undertake due diligence to ensure that the level of clinical competency verified meets their local clinical needs. The certification does not automatically demonstrate CASE equivalence or clinical competency.

The ASAR has a similar function to CASE in relation to programme accreditation for ultrasound courses in Australia. Additionally, it provides accreditation for individual sonographers who meet its standards. The ASAR does not have regulatory powers and is unable to remove a sonographer from its register, so while it might help to determine that someone has achieved an appropriate level of qualification, it does not ensure competency.

5.3 *Registration and clinical competency*

No statutory or voluntary register can imply clinical competency. Employers still need to undertake due diligence when considering employing someone from the UK or with international qualifications that are not CASE accredited.

Clinical competency, including report writing, could be assessed or demonstrated prior to interviewing the candidate or as part of the interview process. To avoid discrimination, the method used should be similar for all candidates.

6. Fetal Anomaly Screening Programme (England)

The National Health Service Fetal Anomaly Screening Programme (NHS FASP)¹¹ in England recommends that in addition to completing the [elearning for healthcare](#) NHS FASP online training:

Any ultrasound practitioner performing NHS FASP screening or diagnostic ultrasound scans should hold, as a minimum, one of the following:

- Certificate or Diploma in Medical Ultrasound (CMU/DMU) of the College of Radiographers (CoR)
- Post Graduate Certificate in Medical Ultrasound (PgCert) approved and validated by a higher institute of education and accredited by CASE or equivalent; the qualification should be relevant to obstetric ultrasound practice
- Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG)/Royal College of Radiologists (RCR) Diploma in Obstetric Ultrasound, Advanced Training Skills Module (ATSM) or Subspecialty Training in Maternal Fetal Medicine¹²

As ultrasound provision in antenatal care differs between countries, clinical managers need to ensure that the sonographer is appropriately qualified and competent to perform commissioned screening and diagnostic scans to ensure the safety of patients and the quality standards of the service.

7. Preceptorship and support for international recruits

As part of the employment package, preceptorship is a key element in supporting sonographers who do not hold a CASE accredited award to settle into their roles, while providing support for their development needs. CASE suggests that:

Employers may want to consider competency assessment as part of a probationary period of employment.⁶

If either the employer or the employee identifies gaps in practice areas, a process must be implemented to address the issue and to attempt to align the employee's knowledge and skills with UK standard practice. Areas may include, but are not limited to, writing actionable reports,¹² enhanced communication with staff and patients, safety and governance. The [Preceptorship and Capability Development Framework for Sonographers](#)¹³ offers information that may help support clinical teams to recognise roles and duties associated with sonographer career levels that may assist with integrating the new starter. In addition, there are elearning for healthcare (e-lfh.org.uk) modules that offer sessions aimed at international recruits.

International recruits are entitled to equal career opportunities while working in the UK.

The BMUS and SoR survey in 2023 highlighted a range of methods that departments used to support internationally qualified sonographers when they started working in the UK. The most common, other than preceptorship and induction, were:

- paired scanning lists or shadowing experienced staff within the department. This provided opportunities for the international recruit to become familiar with UK policy, procedure and practice and the existing members of staff to learn more from the international recruit
- direct supervision until signed off as competent in specific areas of practice. Sometimes employed at a lower pay banding until capabilities are demonstrated
- local training and/or competency assessments if gaps were identified during supervised scan lists
- mentorship and buddy schemes

8. Suggestions from the BMUS and SoR survey 2023

Respondents to the 2023 survey used different methods for recruiting internationally qualified sonographers and those without a CASE accredited award from the UK, including:

- full-day assessment in the department, including communication and scanning ability or hands-on scanning at interview or after initial first interview
- review certificates at interview
- speaking to candidate's previous employer for a verbal reference
- mapping the curriculum content to CASE learning outcomes; candidates need to supply UK ENIC statement of comparability, a transcript of their qualifications and detailed syllabus of the course content

It is acknowledged that a standardised approach, while perceived as ideal, may not always be practical or necessary for all candidates. Therefore, a combination of strategies to seek to ensure that sonographers without a CASE accredited award appear suitable for work in the UK is recommended.

9. At a glance checklist

The checklist below summarises the key points in this guidance and lists some of the things to consider when seeking to recruit a sonographer without a CASE accredited qualification. The checklist is intended to complement rather than replace local recruitment policies and procedures.

	Factors to consider	Section in this guidance document
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pre-employment checks such as ensuring that the appropriate visa requirements can be met and active recruitment is not taking place from 'red list' countries	1
<input type="checkbox"/>	English language requirements – are checks needed?	2
<input type="checkbox"/>	Level of education UK ENIC can be used to check level of award e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CertHE, DipHE, ordinary degree (lower level than UK entry to radiography) • BSc (Hons), PgCert, PgDip, MSc 	3
<input type="checkbox"/>	Type of ultrasound qualification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • academic level • length of time • type of course • ultrasound curriculum content • assessment methods (academic) • clinical competency assessment • range and level of clinical experience 	4.1
<input type="checkbox"/>	CASE equivalence of the award See CASE, 2023 advice	4.2
<input type="checkbox"/>	RPL for international ultrasound qualifications or those from non-CASE accredited UK awards	4.3
<input type="checkbox"/>	Statutory or voluntary professional registration	5
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clinical competency including report writing. This might be investigated prior to interviewing the candidate or as part of the interview process. This should be similar for all candidates to avoid discrimination.	5
<input type="checkbox"/>	CASE equivalence – is the candidate eligible to perform NHS FASP screening and diagnostic scans or similar in the devolved countries?	6
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider employment history: how will knowledge, skills and competency be mapped and how might potential gaps be identified?	7
<input type="checkbox"/>	Preceptorship – do you have processes in place to ensure a satisfactory environment that enables the new recruit to complete a structured preceptorship period?	7

Additional resources

- Department of Health (Northern Ireland) 2023. Northern Ireland Code of Practice for the International Recruitment of Health and Social Care Personnel. Available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-ni-code-practice-23.pdf> (Accessed 3 May 2024)
- NHS Employers 2024. Quick guide: Code of Practice for International Recruitment. Available at: <https://www.nhsemployers.org/publications/quick-guide-code-practice-international-recruitment> (Accessed 3 May 2024)
- Scottish Government 2023. International recruitment of health and social care personnel: code of practice - March 2023 (revised). Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-code-practice-international-recruitment-health-social-care-personnel-march-2023-revised/pages/6/> (Accessed 3 May 2024)
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6. CASE 2022. Standards for Sonographic Education. Available at: <http://www.case-uk.org/standards/> (Accessed 11 March 2024)
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8. SoR 2021. Ultrasound Training, Employment, Registration and Professional Indemnity Insurance. Available at: <https://www.sor.org/learning-advice/professional-body-guidance->

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Disclaimer

The Society of Radiographers and the British Medical Ultrasound Society produced this guidance document as a tool to support the recruitment of sonographers who do not hold a CASE accredited award. The recommendations within this document are based on national and regulatory body guidance, with links to current evidence and best practice.

This document is designed to inform local recruitment processes and assist in the recruitment and preceptorship of sonographers without a CASE accredited award by referring to relevant information. It does not replace good recruitment and selection processes currently in place locally. Local decisions regarding employment are the responsibility of the employing organisation.