

A step change for a sustainable NHS workforce: General Election 2024

The Council of Deans of Health represents 105 university and further education faculties, across all regions and nations of the UK, engaged in education and research for nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions. Our members teach **200,000 healthcare students** at any one time.

A degree in nursing, midwifery or one of the allied health professions (AHPs) is a gateway to a career of public service, unlocking opportunity for the individual, levelling up communities, and supporting the NHS. Healthcare research drives improvement in patient outcomes, changing lives across the UK.

Ambitions to grow the health workforce cannot be met by doing business as usual. **A step change is needed.** The Council of Deans of Health is calling on political parties and candidates in the upcoming General Election to commit to **four pledges that will bolster the domestic NHS workforce:**

1

Urgently address the growing shortfall in healthcare educators and researchers

2

Boost healthcare student recruitment and retention as a priority

3

Review the overlapping layers of regulation facing healthcare education

4

Expand and diversify the placements needed for a growth in healthcare students

Underpinning each pledge are two key principles:

1. **A joint endeavour between health and education sectors** – led from the top with cross-departmental work and shared responsibility between DHSC and DfE
2. **The involvement of universities at every stage** in discussions and decisions on the NHS workforce they educate, including at local level with their NHS and community partners

The four pledges above also reinforce each other:

- More healthcare educators and researchers are essential to expanding education opportunities for students
- Increasing student numbers leads to a wider pool of future educators and researchers
- Smarter regulation and greater placement capacity will support growth in student numbers and improve job satisfaction and staff retention for educators

1 Urgently address the growing shortfall in healthcare educators and researchers
Nearly 50% of healthcare educators are over the age of 50. We face a shortage of healthcare academics and researchers, limiting the number of nurses, midwives and AHPs that can be educated. To maintain and expand the number of UK-health professionals in the NHS, and ensure health education and practice is underpinned by relevant research and evidence, a plan for the long-term stabilisation and expansion of academics and researchers is urgently required.

The Council calls for:

- **The promotion of portfolio careers** between practice, academia and research to existing NHS staff and healthcare students to support retention
- **A plan to address the obstacles preventing more flexible career journeys** across healthcare, education and research

2 Boost healthcare student recruitment and retention as a priority
Applications for healthcare courses have declined sharply and action is needed now. Students may not see an NHS career as desirable or be aware of the variety of roles and career routes available. Too many AHP roles are not widely known about, but even within midwifery and nursing, the different paths in practice, academia and research are not well-understood. High financial and emotional costs faced by healthcare students also contribute to drop-out rates.

The Council calls for:

- **A focused advertising campaign and resources** highlighting the varied career routes and opportunities that healthcare courses can offer to UK students
- **A cross-departmental joint approach** to further financial and pastoral support for healthcare students

3 Review the overlapping layers of regulation facing healthcare education
Healthcare faculties are subject to regulation from both health and education sectors. This overlap can lead to incoherence, hindering the expansion of education provision. Better join-up between regulators would avoid competing demands on educators, streamlining reporting and enhance safety. We can also drive student growth and quality by moving to assess student competencies instead of study and placement hours. Embedding a more responsive regulation culture would let us keep up with the opportunities of changing technology and patient need.

The Council calls for:

- **A cross-sector review of the regulatory responsibilities** of universities providing healthcare courses, to reduce duplication and establish greater alignment across health and education regulators
- **A roadmap to an outcome-focused approach to healthcare education regulation**, assessing competencies rather than hours, by the end of the parliamentary term

4 Expand and diversify the placements needed for a growth in healthcare students
Placements are a fundamental component of most healthcare courses. Limits on their availability within the NHS effectively caps the number of healthcare students we can educate and enormously impacts the student experience. The NHS must work better with universities to expand and improve student placement provision. Diversifying placements in community and care settings would also grow provision while familiarising students with a wider array of work environments and roles. Simulated practice learning is vital to placement expansion and quality education but requires further investment and regulatory reform to do more.

The Council calls for:

- **Government to use its convening power** to ensure the NHS and partners work better with universities to offer the high quality in-person placements needed by students
- **Sustained capital investment** and a more adaptive regulatory framework to further embrace simulated practice learning and technologies in promoting patient care