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Sonographer workforce developments

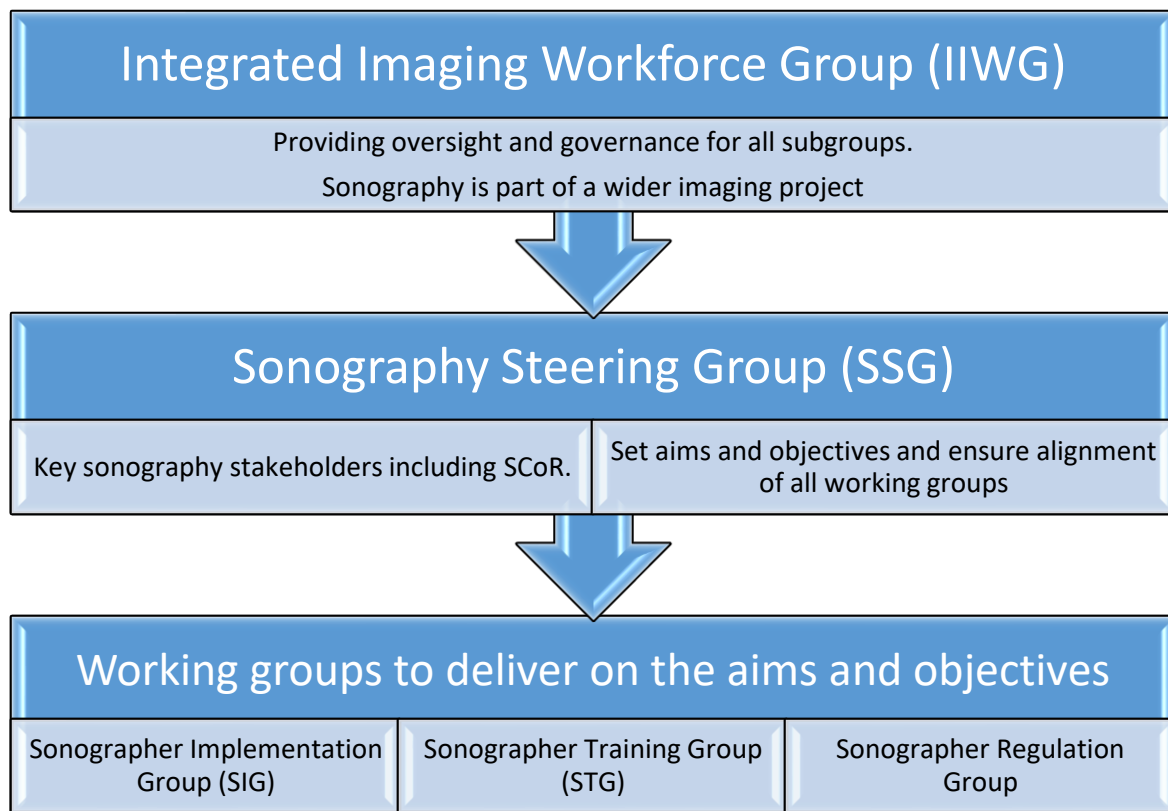
Ultrasound education is undergoing innovative changes. During this process the Society and College of Radiographers (SCoR) continues to be a key stakeholder in national work, establishing a career framework for the 'profession', ensuring that all levels of ultrasound practice can be supported to provide safe, effective services and career development pathways. The SCoR are mindful of the challenges faced during this work and the priority is to support those in existing ultrasound roles throughout these developments. This is in addition to ensuring that any new professional pathways are clearly defined to ensure safe, competent, well-supported sonographers enter the workforce. Effective career pathways should benefit the current sonography workforce to develop skills and competencies to progress within the career framework. Patient protection and safe working practice for future developments is paramount. All proposed developments are reviewed by the SCoR UK council.

The shortage of sonographers and the increasing demand on the ultrasound workforce have been highlighted in many documents, such as the 2017 Centre for Workforce Intelligence (CfWI) report.¹ In 2014, the Society and College of Radiographers (SCoR)² reported that a third of sonographers were over the age of 50, in a sample of 59 departments who employ sonographers. Similar findings were reported in the CfWI report in 2017,¹ although some regions were more affected than others, with, for example, Wessex predicting that 20% of the sonographer workforce were expected to retire in five years.¹ In 2016 the first direct entry BSc (Hons) programme in ultrasound was launched in the UK³, with sonographers from this programme due to qualify in summer 2019. Additionally there is an apprenticeship standard being written for medical ultrasound⁴, this is due to be offered at academic level 6 [BSc (Hons)]. The challenge of Sonography not being recognised as a profession has been highlighted in surveys,^{5,6,7} as a concern when considering new models of education.

In a survey this year by the SCoR⁷, 72 departments responded and suggested that there was an average of 2.65 sonographer vacancies within the Trusts. The mean predicted shortfall of sonographers needed to provide the service in 5 years was 4.6, with some departments suggesting they would need an additional 20 sonographers to meet the increasing demands. New career pathways have been discussed for some time^{8,9} and Health Education England (HEE) are working with stakeholders to look at possible ways to increase the sonographer workforce to meet the demands. At the 2017 Society of Radiographers (SoR) Annual Delegates Conference¹⁰ a motion was carried to *'ensure that there is an appropriate career progression route in ultrasound ... without reducing the quality of service, job satisfaction or dumbing down of the role'*. The SCoR are actively involved in all the various work streams with other professional groups, such as the British Medical Ultrasound Society (BMUS), the Royal College of Radiologists (RCR), the Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education (CASE), Society for Vascular Technology of Great Britain and Ireland (SVT) and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP). These stakeholders are focussing on developing a career progression framework to meet current demands and changes within sonography education. Initiatives from HEE include commissioning education to train 200 health care professionals to undertake third trimester pregnancy scans¹¹ and statutory registration for sonographers. Additionally the Department of Education Apprenticeship Standard for medical ultrasound is being developed by employers working closely with education providers and a range of key stakeholders, including the SCoR. The ambition is for this standard to be aligned with the HEE work and CASE learning outcomes. This article aims to provide an update on one of these projects, which is the work led by HEE to develop a safe and effective sonography career framework (figure 1).

The HEE documentation when it is published will refer to various ‘levels’, including career levels and academic levels. It will not however refer to Agenda for Change (AfC) pay bands, as this is not part of HEE’s remit. AfC is a system which “allocates posts to set pay bands, using the Job Evaluation Scheme”¹² which is separate to the career and academic levels referred to by HEE. Also involved with HEE’s work are Skills for Health (SfH), who are the Sector Skills Council for Health in the UK and publish National Occupational Standards for ultrasound practice,¹³ which are linked to the Knowledge and Skills Frameworks (KSF) for different professional activities for anyone working in that area of practice. The SfH use ‘career framework levels’, these relate to levels of autonomous practice, responsibility and decision making within the role¹⁴. Any reference to career level relates to the SfH definitions of career level, for example the newly qualified radiographer will be career level 5, moving to career level 6 as they develop more autonomous practice and increase the level of responsibility and decision making¹³. Academic levels relate to the Quality Assurance Agency academic levels in England,¹⁴ which include level 6, BSc (Hons); level 7, Master’s level qualifications and level 8, doctoral level.¹⁵

Figure 1: The current work stream to develop a Sonographer Career Framework



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| Developing a career framework and ‘profession’, including defining capabilities at each level of practice. | Identify ways to increase ultrasound clinical capacity and support regional development of educational models. | Lobbying government in an attempt to enable sonography to become a registered profession. |
| As part of this group a number of documents are being developed, these include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overarching ‘vision’ document of how an NHS | The group are undertaking a number of initiatives, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating workforce capacity and regional challenges | A case is being made in support of ‘Sonography’ becoming a profession in its own right. |

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| <p>ultrasound service should be delivered¹⁶</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcomes and educational standards for CASE accreditation of programmes of education¹⁷ • Updating the CASE handbook • Preceptorship standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigating innovative methods of clinical ultrasound education • Developing case studies to showcase some of the different educational models that might be used. | |
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In conclusion, the SCoR are working with other stakeholder, on behalf of members and service users, to ensure that current developments support all levels of sonographic practice and provide a clear framework for advancement of sonographers, whilst maintaining a safe and effective ultrasound service.

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