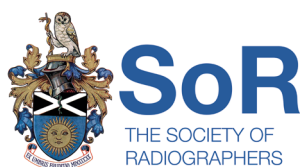


Return to Practice: Ultrasound

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1. Introduction

There is a long-standing shortage of sonographers in the UK; the Society of Radiographers (SoR) estimates a shortfall of 12–20%,^{1,2} which is expected to increase.³ Many employers have reported difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified sonographers. The SoR provides advice as part of its professional activities to members who are not currently working and who wish to return to work as sonographers. The following is a compilation of advice provided to members and covers the major areas of concern. It also highlights relevant documents and websites for sonographers who are considering returning to practice. General advice on returning to the radiography profession is available on the [SoR website](#) and is useful for practitioners returning to practice, managers and those supporting the returner.

2. Registration

2.1 Statutory registration

Re-registration with a statutory regulatory body, such as the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), is recommended if registration has lapsed. It is a [requirement of the HCPC](#) that anyone applying to re-register after being out of practice for more than two years undertakes a period of updating their professional skills and knowledge. The HCPC are able to re-register those who initially trained for one of the professions that it regulates, for example radiographers and clinical scientists. The HCPC have a [booklet](#) on return to practice.

Sonographers with a professional background in nursing or midwifery should investigate whether it is possible for them to re-register with the [Nursing and Midwifery Council](#) (NMC).

Statutory regulators are as flexible as they can be in their approach. The HCPC, for example, will allow a wide range of ultrasound-related activities to count towards re-registration requirements.

2.2 Voluntary registration

Not all sonographers will be able to register or re-register with a statutory regulatory body. The SoR is supportive of those sonographers who, through no fault of their own, cannot gain statutory registration. A full discussion of this topic is available in the SoR document [Ultrasound training, employment, registration and professional indemnity insurance](#) and there is additional advice on the [NHS Employers](#) website.

For sonographers who cannot register or re-register with a statutory regulatory body, application should be made to the [Register of Clinical Technologists](#) (RCT). Details and online application forms are available on the [RCT website](#). Applications to the RCT are also welcomed from sonographers already registered with the HCPC or NMC.

3. Clinical experience

The return to work process can seem daunting. It is recommended that sonographers contact a local department to see whether there is potential for future employment and/or the opportunity to update their clinical experience in the current work environment.

3.1 Updating professional skills and knowledge

Updating professional skills and knowledge will depend on the opportunities available locally and the length of time away from practice. It is possible that an ultrasound department or independent service provider will employ a sonographer from the start of their return to practice period; alternatively, they may agree to help with gaining clinical experience but might not have a post available for employment. In the latter case, the service may offer a voluntary (honorary) contract. For queries regarding contracts or terms and conditions of employment as a returner, sonographers are advised to contact the [industrial relations department](#) of the SoR or equivalent organisation that they may be a member of. There are occasional grants, employer programmes and other support available for those returning to professional registers and current information is available on the [SoR 'return to practice news' site](#).

A mentor will be required during the return to practice period as well as a properly planned updating scheme. The contents of the scheme will depend on any regulatory requirements and on the likely position/role that will be performed after the return to practice period is complete. As stated previously, the HCPC are flexible in their approach and self-study can contribute to the overall hours specified. We recommend that time is also spent (as an observer) in other imaging modalities, such as CT, MRI, general radiography, interventional radiography and radionuclide imaging. This will increase awareness of how these modalities currently relate to ultrasound imaging and will enable referrals to be made according to scope of practice, departmental protocols and registration status. If time is available, it would also be beneficial to visit other departments associated with likely patient pathways, such as oncology, radiotherapy, maternity and urology. Sonographers should be given the opportunity to attend any audit sessions, [radiology events and learning meetings](#), and other meetings associated with the delivery of a quality ultrasound service, as appropriate.

Formal education is not a requirement for re-registration; however, should formal updating be desired the best approach would be to visit the website of the [Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education](#) (CASE). CASE accredits focused ultrasound courses, which may be of relevance to returning sonographers. Universities also, from time to time, run other short courses; many universities also offer individually negotiated learning pathways. Although these types of courses are not advertised on the CASE website, the contact details for all CASE-accredited universities are provided, allowing sonographers to get in touch directly.

Short courses and study days are also advertised in journals such as [Synergy](#) and on the [British Medical Ultrasound Society](#) website.

Employers and service providers may ask or arrange for an assessment of competence at the end of the return to practice period. These should be tailored to the department and to the sonographer's own requirements and may or may not involve a CASE-accredited education institution.

Assessments should not rely solely on the number of patients scanned; this can give an indication of the range of experience but not necessarily of competence.

3.2 Obstetrics

If a sonographer is planning to return to practice in obstetric ultrasound then they are likely to be involved with the Fetal Anomaly Screening Programme (FASP) or equivalent programmes run by organisations in Scotland and Wales. Necessary training will be needed to perform the ultrasound measurements (crown–rump length and nuchal translucency) that form part of the combined screening test for Trisomy 21, 18 and 13, and to obtain a [Down’s Syndrome Screening Quality Assurance Support Service](#) (DQASS) identity code. Every participating department has a screening support sonographer (SSS) who will be able to give advice on the full DQASS process. Guidance for practitioners is available in the [FASP Programme handbook](#).

There is also a wealth of information available on the [Government website](#) where all screening programme information is located. This includes links to mandatory on-line training and on-line support tools for the FASP.

E-learning linked to the FASP can be found on the [elearning for healthcare](#) website. There are a number of modules available that must be completed by any sonographer undertaking FASP ultrasound examinations.

3.3 Independent providers

There is likely to be an increasing demand for work undertaken in the community and by independent providers who have obtained contracts to provide diagnostic services for NHS patients. Independent providers may also recruit and offer training to sonographers returning to practice, in view of the shortage of sonographers. It is advisable to review honorary or temporary contracts to ensure that primary indemnity insurance is provided.

3.4 Supervision/reporting

A clear written statement should be obtained from the service provider at the start of the return to practice period detailing the level of supervision to be provided and the process for reviewing scans and reports before they are issued. Arrangements for verification of reports should also be set out clearly in advance. Clinical supervision should be a reflective process, to support the emotional wellbeing and professional development of the practitioner.

4. Online learning

In addition to traditionally published books and journals there is a wide range of online learning material that can count towards both HCPC/NMC and the sonographer's own learning requirements. The College of Radiographers (CoR) provide information about [learning resources](#) and access to the 'CPD Now' tool for recording continuing professional development (CPD) evidence. There are also the NHS 'elearning for healthcare' on-line modules, which are free to all who hold a valid email address. There are many other providers of on-line learning in ultrasound; some websites are free but some require payment. It is also possible to join other professional or scientific organisations that will allow members access to their own on-line learning material.

4.1 elearning for healthcare (elfh)

[elfh](#) is an award-winning programme funded by Health Education England (HEE), in partnership with the NHS and professional bodies, providing high quality learning materials free of charge for training the NHS workforce across the UK.

Formed following a groundbreaking project in Radiology, elfh is now in the process of delivering over 350 e-learning programmes in partnership with medical Royal Colleges, the CoR and other healthcare organisations.

A number of ultrasound sessions are available within the elfh 'clinical imaging' section. These sessions are a very valuable learning resource and can contribute to a practitioner's CPD.

In order to access the e-learning sessions, it is necessary to first [register](#) with the programme. The registration web page gives information on who is eligible to register and provides alternative access routes for those who are not. Returning sonographers who plan to undertake NHS work should have access to elfh and can seek support, if needed, to register. A useful [sample demonstration session](#) is available also.

5. SoR | CoR website and the document library

The Society and College of Radiographers (SoR | CoR) website has a wealth of information relating to the radiography profession and [ultrasound imaging](#) in particular. The '[news](#)' section provides updates on issues affecting the imaging workforce in general.

The SoR | CoR publishes a wide range of professional documents, which can be accessed through the online [document library](#). The search terms 'ultrasound' and 'sonographer' can be used to identify those documents specifically relating to ultrasound.

There is also a returners' support network available to help; however, this is profession-wide and not ultrasound specific. For further details, please [contact](#) the SoR.

6. Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII)

For members of the SoR, secondary Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII) will be effective, provided conditions of the insurance are adhered to. Full details are available on the [SoR PII](#) webpage.

For those working on either a substantive or voluntary contract, the employer should take first-line responsibility for the practitioner's work under the principle of vicarious liability, but the practitioner must ensure that they work within an employer's protocols and procedures. All aspects relating to indemnity insurance should be confirmed at the time of signing a contract.

It is now a legal requirement to declare that there is appropriate PII available at the time of registration or renewal with the [HCPC](#) or other statutory regulator.

Note: The SoR offers three months' free membership to returners. Email Membership Services: membership@sor.org for details.

7. Finding a post

Information to help with finding a suitable ultrasound post can be found in the SCoR document [Ultrasound training, employment, registration and professional indemnity insurance](#). Posts are advertised on the [NHS jobs](#) website, [SoR website](#), the British Medical Ultrasound Society [website](#), in [Synergy](#), 'Midwives', and in journals published by other professional groups with an interest in ultrasound.

[NHS Employers](#) have advice for services employing sonographers who do not hold statutory registration.

For any queries relating to returning to practice as a sonographer, please contact pande@sor.org.

8. Suggested further reading

- [Standards for the provision of an ultrasound service](#). (RCR/SCoR, December 2014)
- [Guidelines for professional ultrasound practice](#). (SoR/BMUS, December 2021)

9. References

1. Society and College of Radiographers (2019). Ultrasound Workforce UK Census 2019. Available at: https://www.sor.org/getmedia/cb5f34dd-15b2-4595-a37b-7ebdc4bb8d4f/ultrasound_workforce_uk_census_2019.pdf_2 [Accessed August 28, 2020].
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