

The Royal College of Podiatry's response to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committees inquiry into apprenticeship pathways

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Introduction

The Royal College of Podiatry is the professional organisation and trade union for podiatrists in the UK. The College represents qualified, regulated podiatrists across the UK and supports them to deliver high-quality foot and lower limb care and to continue to develop their skills.

Podiatrists are highly skilled healthcare professionals trained to diagnose, treat, rehabilitate, and prevent complications of the foot and lower limb. They enable people to manage foot and ankle pain, skin conditions of the foot and lower limb, treat foot and lower limb infections, and detect, assess and manage lower limb neurological and circulatory disorders. Prevention and management of foot ulceration and infection are critical to preventing lower limb amputation, with high associated morbidity and mortality.

However, despite their critical role, the podiatry workforce has contracted. We believe that there is an urgent need for Welsh Government to consider how podiatry workforce shortages could be addressed through use of apprenticeship pathways and secure funding routes for degree level apprenticeships.

The podiatry workforce

The Royal College of Podiatry is seriously concerned about the sustainability of the podiatry profession in Wales over the medium to long term, and the impact this will have on patient care and people's quality of life, unless there is a significant increase in the number of podiatrists qualifying.

The number of podiatrists working for the NHS in Wales has reduced: in June 2019 there were 249.4 WTE; by June 2024 this had fallen to 218.2 WTE.¹ There are already difficulties recruiting podiatrists at all bands – for example, we hear from Health Boards of there being no applicants for multiple posts advertised. Added to this, the existing workforce has an age profile that is significantly older than for other Allied Health Professions; over 55% of the podiatry workforce in Wales is aged 50+.

The impact of this workforce crisis is further compounded by the needs of an ageing population that is presenting with increasing acuity and living longer with multiple long-term conditions, and a diabetes prevalence that is the highest in the UK. We must have adequate numbers of qualified podiatrists to meet growing population need and to replace those who are retiring, and this requires urgent attention. Investment in the NHS is critical to a healthy population and thus economic growth.

The Royal College of Podiatry fully support the idea of developing degree-level podiatry apprenticeships in Wales and has advocated this for several years as an additional route to qualification, as we believe this could support the urgent need for workforce growth.

Degree-level apprenticeships offer the opportunity to retain and grow existing foot healthcare support staff, rewarding their commitment and experience with career development. Many potential apprentices will have long-term ties with their local area and are therefore more likely to stay on post-qualification. Health Education England (HEE) statistics suggest that as many as 77% stay with their existing employer.² This may make it a particularly useful route to qualification in geographic areas of Wales that have had more difficulty recruiting – particularly given that Wales has only one podiatry undergraduate course provider in Cardiff.

Apprenticeships in podiatry

Degree-level apprenticeships are already available in England for podiatry. In 2019, there were five level 6 podiatry apprentices across England. Despite the impact of COVID-19, the number of podiatry degree apprenticeships has grown significantly with 54 new apprentices starting training in 2022. For the first time since the introduction of apprenticeships in England, one education provider now has more apprentices enrolled than traditional undergraduate routes. The majority of these (79%) were in the NHS. We believe that this growth is indicative that degree-level apprenticeships are a viable route to a podiatry degree.

In Scotland, the 'PREPARE' project is currently running at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, NHS Fife and NHS Forth Valley, in partnership with Glasgow Caledonian University. This also uses an earn-as-you-learn approach, to attract new recruits to podiatry. It allows trainee podiatrists to earn a salary and be integrated within the NHS throughout their studies. Upon completing the course, trainees will have earned a bachelor's degree in podiatry and, once registered with the HCPC, will be guaranteed full-time employment as a Band 5 NHS podiatrist.

Given the podiatry workforce crisis, we simply cannot afford not to explore similar alternative routes to qualification in Wales and learn from these existing routes in other parts of the UK.

Our recommendations:

- Welsh Government need to consider how degree-level apprenticeships can support workforce growth in the NHS, particularly for professions where there are shortages, such as podiatry
- This needs to be supported by a funding model for apprenticeships in the NHS. We understand that, to date, funding issues have been a key barrier to the development of degree level apprenticeships within health care. There must be action to address these barriers and develop apprenticeships as a route to healthcare professional qualification in Wales.
- Given current pressure upon Health Board finances, we are concerned that Health Boards will be deterred from investing in apprenticeships if there is not support with the costs. There must be dialogue with Health Boards to arrive at a sustainable funding approach.
- For apprenticeships to be successful there must also be the support infrastructure to embed them from the start for their employers, and the ongoing funding to support this.

- Careers services, schools and colleges have a key role to play in promoting all routes into careers in the NHS and should work closely with local health and social care organisations to provide meaningful work experience.

For further information, please contact:

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References

¹ See <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/NHS-Staff/Non-Medical-Staff/othernonmedicalstaff-by-jobtype-areaofwork-year>

² Taken from HEE presentation. See https://files.schudio.com/littleport-east-cambs/files/documents/NHS_Careers_Advice_-_Apprenticeships.pdf