

Response to HEIW's draft Education and Training Plan 2024-25

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

We acknowledge the engagement work that Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) have undertaken to inform this plan, and welcome the opportunity to provide further feedback. However, we cannot support the proposal made in the plan to maintain the number of podiatry places commissioned at 27 places, and would urge HEIW to reconsider for the following reasons:

1. The reliance on IMTP requests to determine numbers commissioned

In reaching the proposed number HEIW rely heavily on IMTP requests. We note HEIW's explanation that the number of places commissioned is 23% higher than IMTP requests from health boards. However, we would emphasise that the IMTP requests are unlikely to include the needs of primary care. Podiatrists working in multidisciplinary teams in primary care can add to system capacity. For example, evidence suggests that referral to podiatry is the third most common referral made by GPs.¹ Direct access to podiatrists in First Contact Practitioner or other evolving roles in primary and community care would reduce the workload for GPs and facilitate earlier access to the right care at the right time, closer to home, in line with the primary care model for Wales. It is vital that workforce planning and education commissioning reflects the national priorities for primary care. Current proposed numbers for podiatry places do not appear to do this.

In addition, IMTP numbers do not account for the needs of independent practice. We would emphasise that independent practices make a significant contribution to the wellbeing of the people of Wales, relieving the pressure on NHS services, appropriately referring in, and maintaining population mobility and health. Consideration must also be given to the independent sector when making decisions about the number of places commissioned, and these numbers will clearly be in addition to those included in IMTPs.

2. There are known risks to podiatry workforce stability

HEIW are evidently aware of ongoing risks to workforce stability for podiatry; the appendices to the draft Plan note that podiatry is an ageing workforce with imminent retirements set to deplete the workforce in the next 5 years. The Royal College of Podiatry have repeatedly highlighted this issue to HEIW. It is essential for the sustainability of the profession that we have adequate numbers of podiatrists being trained to replace those who are retiring. Failing to increase commissioning numbers will exacerbate this problem, with inevitable impact on patient care and people's quality of life.

The appendices also note that the NHS podiatry workforce has decreased in size in recent years, unlike other allied health professions.

Welsh Government's recent National Workforce Implementation Plan (2023)² recognises that training places for some professions have not been increased at the same rate as others, and that this needs to be considered moving into the future. As HEIW will be aware, this includes podiatry, which has only experienced small increases in places over recent years, in contrast to some other professions (eg nursing training places have increased by 54.3%, physiotherapist places by 34.3% and occupational therapist places by 62.8% since 2017).³ This was also illustrated clearly in the slides presented at HEIW's engagement meeting (slide 7). We urge HEIW to give particular consideration to this, and how this may have contributed to the relative decline in podiatry numbers, as compared with other allied health professions.

We also note that fill rates for podiatry places commissioned are 100% (see Appendix B, page 11), suggesting that there might well be adequate applicants to sustain an increase in places, in stark contrast to the situation with nursing and some other professions.

3. Population need is rising

As set out in our evidence submitted to inform the plan earlier this year, it is clear that podiatric population need is rising and that more podiatrists will be needed to support population health. Not only this, but the transformation of primary care also offers new opportunities for podiatry to provide access to care closer to home and at an earlier stage. Without sufficient workforce numbers, these benefits cannot be realised.

We are seriously concerned that, as one of the smaller professional groups, the contribution of podiatry to population wellbeing, and the necessity of podiatric access for people living with certain long term conditions (such as diabetes, peripheral arterial disease and arthritis) has been overlooked. If there continues to be only small incremental increases in the number of podiatry commissioned numbers, there will be a failure to meet the future podiatric need of the population in Wales. It is imperative both for the health of the Welsh population and for the sustainability of the podiatry workforce, that commissioning numbers for podiatry are increased for 2024-25.

4. Wider issues affecting the profession

The Royal College of Podiatry recognise that the Education and Training Plan is only one component of a wider conversation about the workforce crisis. We are deeply concerned by the continuing reduction in recruitment into the profession and the reduction in the NHS workforce. Beyond the number of places being commissioned for podiatry, there needs to be wider consideration of how the profession could be made more attractive by offering better career development and structure to encourage retention. In addition, the reliance on a single course provider in Wales may contribute to recruitment difficulties in some parts of Wales. We would encourage HEIW to consider the use of other more flexible educational approaches, such as apprenticeships or satellite centre delivery of the podiatry undergraduate programme in North Wales. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these wider issues with HEIW further.

Conclusion

Previously, the College has recommended that podiatry commissioning numbers were increased. We make this same call again. Given the acknowledged risks to the workforce

and population health, we are seriously concerned that HEIW are not acting on this, and we cannot support the proposals made in this draft plan.

Since increasing numbers of people with long term conditions will require access to podiatry, a healthy pipeline of new graduates into the profession is needed both to maintain and increase workforce numbers.

We would strongly urge HEIW to arrange a meeting with the College so we can explain our concerns in further detail and to ensure that the podiatry workforce is future-proofed, enabling podiatry to play its full part in helping people to stay healthy, mobile and active, thereby achieving the strategic vision set out in A Healthier Wales.

For further information, please contact:

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Cc: Ruth Crowder, Welsh Government.

References

¹ R. Ferguson et. al., Encounters for foot and ankle pain in UK primary care, British Journal of General Practice 2019; 69 (683): e422-e429. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X703817>

² Welsh Government National Workforce Implementation Plan: Addressing NHS Wales Workforce Challenges, January 2023 <https://www.gov.wales/national-workforce-implementation-plan> [accessed online on 13 February 2023].

³ Welsh Government National Workforce Implementation Plan: Addressing NHS Wales Workforce Challenges, January 2023 <https://www.gov.wales/national-workforce-implementation-plan> [accessed online on 13 February 2023].