

Universities Scotland Briefing: Investing, Protecting and Renewing Scotland's NHS – Scottish Government debate

Key Messages

- Universities' contribution to the NHS includes workforce training and development, world-leading clinical research, innovation on diagnostic standards, and engineering on medical procedures. We participate in partnerships, deliver community services, and drive economic growth.
- Universities have proposals for new and creative ways to deliver training in medicine and allied health professions, which connect to wider regional and national priorities and would widen the talent pool into the NHS. We would like to see cross-cabinet conversations between health and education to progress this.
- More investment to build capacity in clinical placements is urgently required to help grow the workforce to meet Scotland's needs.
- A sustainable future for the NHS in Scotland also depends on sustainable universities.

Introduction

Across all parts of Scotland, from our major cities to regional, remote, and island communities, universities are not a peripheral support to our health and care system — they are one of its foundations. However, both the higher education and the healthcare sector are facing unprecedented financial challenges. There needs to be better integration by the Scottish Government of health, education and research, and funding which recognises the part we play in supporting the healthcare sector.

Our position:

- Universities are one of the crucial foundations of a successful NHS for Scotland. As Scotland considers how to take forward public sector reform, universities can support Government and the NHS with delivery, building on existing partnerships and close understanding.
- In the last Government, Universities Scotland started a process of strategic cross-cabinet conversations between the health and education portfolios. We would like this to resume with urgency so we can progress some of the proposals into tangible action.

Challenges and opportunities:

- There have been challenges to the skilled worker pipeline into the NHS across the country, at the same time as wider demographic changes shrink the potential pool of applicants. The cost of living is a significant issue for many students, but those choosing to study a healthcare specialism face more years in training and balancing placements, something which many simply cannot afford.
- There needs to be a national, coordinated approach to placement capacity and quality to help support students fulfil their clinical experience requirements, and better support for trainees who are required to stay far away from their own homes on placement.
- There are also barriers to upskilling the existing NHS workforce. Universities are able to take creative approaches to these challenges, including hub-and-spoke models of delivery, gateway programmes, and graduate apprenticeships or other earn-as-you-learn opportunities. Part-time study options and articulation pathways (college to university) can all assist in increasing the number of healthcare graduates in Scotland to meet patient and NHS needs, however these require additional investment and a supportive regulatory environment.
- There has been a decade-long decline in the number of clinical academics; the doctors and other healthcare professionals who split their time between treating patients and taking forward research into prevention strategies and early diagnosis. The evidence shows that hospitals and healthcare systems that are active in clinical research report lower mortality rates and improved standards of care. Yet the number taking forward clinical academic careers has fallen by 30% in Scotland over the last ten years. There's a practical roadmap, developed by Professor Chinnery's Task and Finish Group, to address this decline and secure healthcare innovation and we seek coordinated action from Government and NHS Trusts to deliver. [Read more about the challenge and the solution here.](#)

What action MSPs can take:

- We'd welcome the chance to discuss this with you in more detail. Please get in touch about a meeting with Universities Scotland to progress the issues we raise.
- Lend support to a continued dialogue on a cross-cabinet basis, ensuring closer policy coordination between education and health.
- Support additional clinical placement capacity within your NHS Boards.

- Advocate for policies which strengthen Scottish health research capacity, including implementation of Professor Chinnery's Roadmap¹ to reverse the decline of clinical researchers in the UK.
- Commission a short inquiry through the relevant parliamentary committee, when established, to address the challenges facing the existing NHS workforce in reskilling, including delivery in remote and rural areas, and to surface the issues around recruitment and retention across the country.

Key facts:

- Scotland's universities are training approx. 6,000 medical students to be doctors and a further 20,000 people in 13 different allied health professions like paramedicine, podiatry, and physiotherapy as part of NHS workforce planning.
- There is greater socioeconomic diversity amongst graduate doctors following universities' sustained commitment to widening access. Learners from the poorest 40% of areas across Scotland now represent 24.1% of entrants to medical schools, up from 10.6% in 2010.
- Scottish university research excellence underpins the country's thriving life sciences and biotechnologies sector which creates jobs and delivers economic growth. Eight of Scotland's top ten start-ups are med-technology related, including Amphista Therapeutics, a University of Dundee spinout, and Resolution Therapeutics, a University of Edinburgh spinout. (Top ten ranked by value raised as at 2022).

ENDS

¹ <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/MRC-290125-ClinicalResearchersReversingTheDecline.pdf>