

9 March 2026

As Scotland approaches the 2026 elections, the [Council of Deans of Health Scotland](#), representing the twelve universities that educate Scotland's future nursing, midwifery, and allied health professionals (AHPs) call on all parties to commit to a sustainable future for healthcare education and research.

Our universities play a vital role in the provision of Scotland's NHS workforce and drive innovation and economic growth. However, the sector faces unprecedented challenges:

- financial pressures leading to redundancies and possible course closures,
- declining student recruitment,
- growing shortfall in healthcare educators and researchers,
- a gap in research investment compared to the rest of the UK.

Without urgent action, Scotland risks undermining its ability to deliver the health and social care workforce our communities need.

We ask you to support the following priorities:

## **1. Secure Financial Sustainability**

Scottish universities are facing acute financial pressures that threaten the viability of healthcare programmes essential to the NHS. The funding unit price for nursing, midwifery, and allied health courses has remained static for over a decade, despite rising costs and inflation. This situation is unsustainable and requires urgent review to ensure universities can continue to deliver high-cost, high-quality programmes that underpin Scotland's health and social care system.

Declining student interest in healthcare courses has compounded these challenges, reducing institutional income and, in 2024/25, resulting in unprecedented penalties for failing to meet regulated targets in controlled subjects such as nursing, midwifery, and paramedicine. This approach risks destabilising provision at a time when Scotland needs to grow not shrink its healthcare workforce.

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We are calling for a constructive partnership between Government and the wider higher education sector to address these financial challenges and to work collaboratively on strategies to increase student demand. A sustainable funding model and proactive measures to boost recruitment are critical to securing the future of Scotland's health services and reducing health inequalities. These asks will ensure the recommended actions from the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce can be achieved.

## **2. Reverse Declining Student Recruitment**

Recruitment to nursing has declined significantly over the past four intake cycles with clear regional disparities, leaving most universities unable to meet their regulated targets. Despite Scotland offering one of the most generous financial support packages for students in controlled subjects, enrolment for nursing remains far below the level required to sustain the future workforce. Although current recruitment to midwifery programmes remains at a point that meets the Scottish Government target, there has been a sharp fall in the number of applicants to midwifery programmes. These trends pose a serious risk to the long-term resilience of health and social care services and require urgent, coordinated action. Paramedicine recruitment remains strong, and joint analysis of why it outperforms other healthcare disciplines is needed to guide broader recruitment strategies.

We recommend a comprehensive review to identify and address barriers to entry. This is a national challenge that demands a multifaceted response, including:

- A national recruitment campaign to raise awareness of the breadth of healthcare careers.
- Enhanced school engagement to inform pupils about pathways into the professions, including the development of a toolkit for career advisors.
- Development of flexible education routes - such as the next generation HNC, apprenticeships and earn-as-you-learn models – streamlining regulation and equalising funding, alongside the traditional degree programmes.

While financial support exists, many healthcare students still experience hardship. Consideration should be given to targeted increases in student support to make these courses more attractive and viable.

Beyond funding, the current delivery model for healthcare education should be reviewed to ensure it reflects the needs of a diverse student population. Supporting the universities to expand innovative options and new pathways would be beneficial.

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### **3. Educator Workforce Sustainability**

The shortage of healthcare educators, complicated by funding pressures and redundancies, is a bottleneck in our ability to train the next generation of healthcare professionals. Recruitment challenges for educator and research careers are caused by competition with the NHS where salaries are higher and the lack of mobility between practice and academia.

A sustainable healthcare academic workforce is fundamental to producing homegrown professionals for Scotland's NHS and the wider health and social care sector. Without it, the pipeline of nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals cannot be maintained. We urge Government to work proactively with universities and NHS partners to implement solutions that secure this workforce for the long term, including:

- Developing clear and attractive clinical academic career frameworks for healthcare educators, with progression routes and recognition of clinical expertise.
- Introducing targeted incentives to encourage experienced clinicians to transition into education roles and fostering opportunities for newly qualified practitioners to develop their skills and knowledge in education and research.
- Join up between health and education in strategic decision making and workforce planning to ensure alignment with Scotland's Population Health Framework and the ambition to reduce health inequalities.

These measures will help stabilise the educator workforce, strengthen Scotland's capacity to train future health professionals, and ensure alignment between education and service delivery.

### **4. Drive Research and Innovation**

Scotland is falling behind other parts of the UK in healthcare research. Current levels of investment are insufficient to build the capacity and capability required to maintain competitiveness and deliver impact. In particular, there is a critical shortage of support for Early Career Researchers and postgraduate study, which threatens the pipeline of future research leaders.

This underinvestment limits Scotland's ability to generate research that improves patient outcomes and constrains opportunities for innovation and spin-outs that drive entrepreneurial growth. Without decisive action, Scotland risks losing talent, research opportunities, and inward investment to other parts of the UK and international markets.

To address this, we recommend:

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- Targeted investment in research capacity, prioritising early career and postgraduate support to secure the next generation of healthcare researchers.
- Creation of a dedicated Ministerial portfolio for research, ensuring strategic alignment between health, innovation, and economic policy.
- Expansion of translational research infrastructure, including support for biomedical research centres and innovation funds to accelerate spin-out development.
- Strengthen partnerships between universities, NHS Scotland, and industry to maximise impact.

A bold, coordinated approach will ensure Scotland is a global leader in healthcare research, delivering better outcomes for patients and contributing to economic growth.

**Our Commitment:**

We are committed to working in partnership with all political parties to secure an NHS workforce equipped for the future, strengthen Scotland's research capacity, and create opportunities for every learner. We invite you to share your party's vision for healthcare education and research, or provide a statement we can share with our members. Together, we can build a sustainable, innovative health system that delivers for Scotland's people.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Susan Dawkes



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