

# Retention of sonographers: an exploration of sonographers' experiences/perceptions and how these impact their intent to stay working within the NHS.

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## Introduction

The sonographer vacancy rate is currently 12.6% (SCoR, 2019). The demand for sonographers is rising due to the increasing imaging demand. Maintaining the current sonography workforce is essential. The Society and College of Radiographers (SCoR) 2019 Ultrasound Workforce UK Census found sonographers are more likely to leave their posts than other radiographers. The SCoR ranks sonographer retention as a top research priority.

## Research Aims

- To determine whether sonographers are considering leaving roles in the NHS before expected retirement age.
- To identify factors that influence sonographers to leave roles in the NHS before expected retirement age.
- To identify characteristics of workplaces linked with sonographers' intent to remain working within the NHS.
- To determine if there are different themes that emerge between sonographers in the early stages of their careers compared to late career stage sonographers.
- To use the study findings to make recommendations to improve sonographer retention within the NHS at local and national levels.

## Methods

This is an empirical mixed methods study. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected through an online questionnaire. Participants were recruited using social network sites using snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria of participants included sonographers and student sonographers who have experience working in the NHS.

## Results

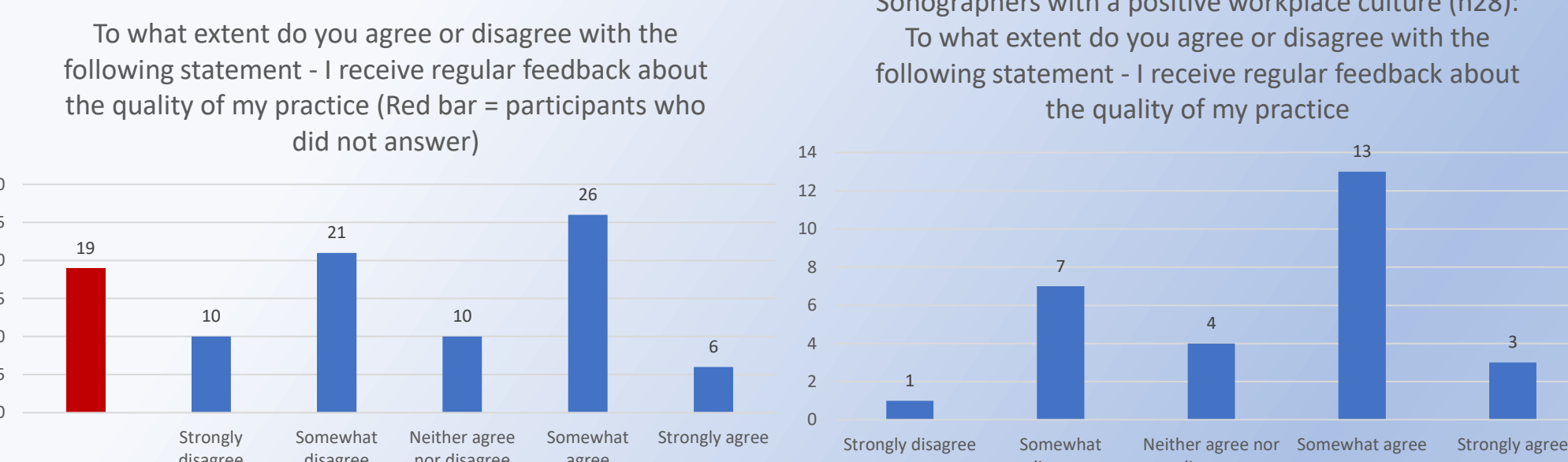
92 participants responses were analysed. 15% (n=11) of the NHS sonographers in the sample were under 55 years old and considering leaving ultrasound.

### WORKPLACE CULTURE

A **negative workplace culture** is linked with a higher intention to leave. 32% of sonographers with a negative culture somewhat/strongly agree they are considering leaving ultrasound compared to 22% in the entire sample.

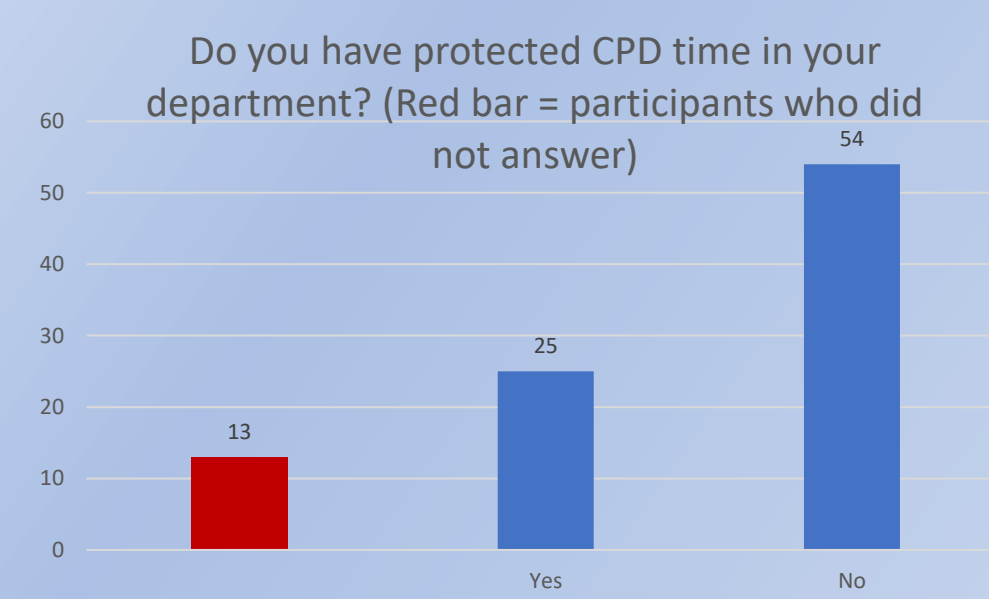
A **positive workplace culture** is linked with:

**Regular feedback:** 57% of sonographers with positive workplace culture somewhat/strongly agree that they are receiving regular feedback about the quality of their practice, which is comparatively more when compared to the entire sample (35%).



**Ability to seek advice:** 68% of those who describe their culture positively somewhat/strongly agree that they can seek advice when needed, compared to 50% of the entire sample.

**Protected CPD time:** 56% of sonographers who get protected CPD time describe their workplace culture as positive compared to 33% who do not get protected CPD time. This is significant as 32% of those with a negative workplace culture are considering leaving ultrasound compared to 22% from the entire sample.



## Recommendations: Model of a Good Ultrasound Department

To meet research aim 5 and use the study findings to make recommendations to improve retention of sonographers within the NHS, the key points from the discussion were reviewed against the 4 pillars of advanced clinical practice (ACP) (HEE, 2017) to develop a model for a good ultrasound department (figure 23). The HEE pillars of ACP were chosen because many of the recommendations emerging from the research are already requirements of the sonographer's advanced practitioner role. This model has not been trialled. It is grounded in the findings of the research, drawing together the desirable characteristics of an ultrasound department. The model is designed to combat professional isolation, allowing sonographers to gain knowledge and ideas from outside the small circle of sonography and bring these into their department. Each department has local conditions, challenges and strengths; a personalised local approach to the following recommendations is required. Implementing a few or just one of the recommendations, which have emerged from this research, has potential to make positive changes to workplace culture and help improve sonographer retention.

## Conclusions

Local solutions exist which could improve sonographers' intent to stay working within the NHS. The recommendations for a good department encourage looking outwards and making links with other professional groups, for example with MSc completion, leadership training and MDT working. This will help to reduce sonographer invisibility and isolation. Sonographer retention remains a complex topic with many contributing factors. Small local changes are required by individuals who understand their own department.

## References

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- Nightingale, J., Burton, M., Appleyard, R., Stevens, T. & Campbell, S. (2021) "Retention of radiographers: A qualitative exploration of factors influencing decisions to leave or remain within the NHS", *Radiography*, 27(3), pp. 795-802.
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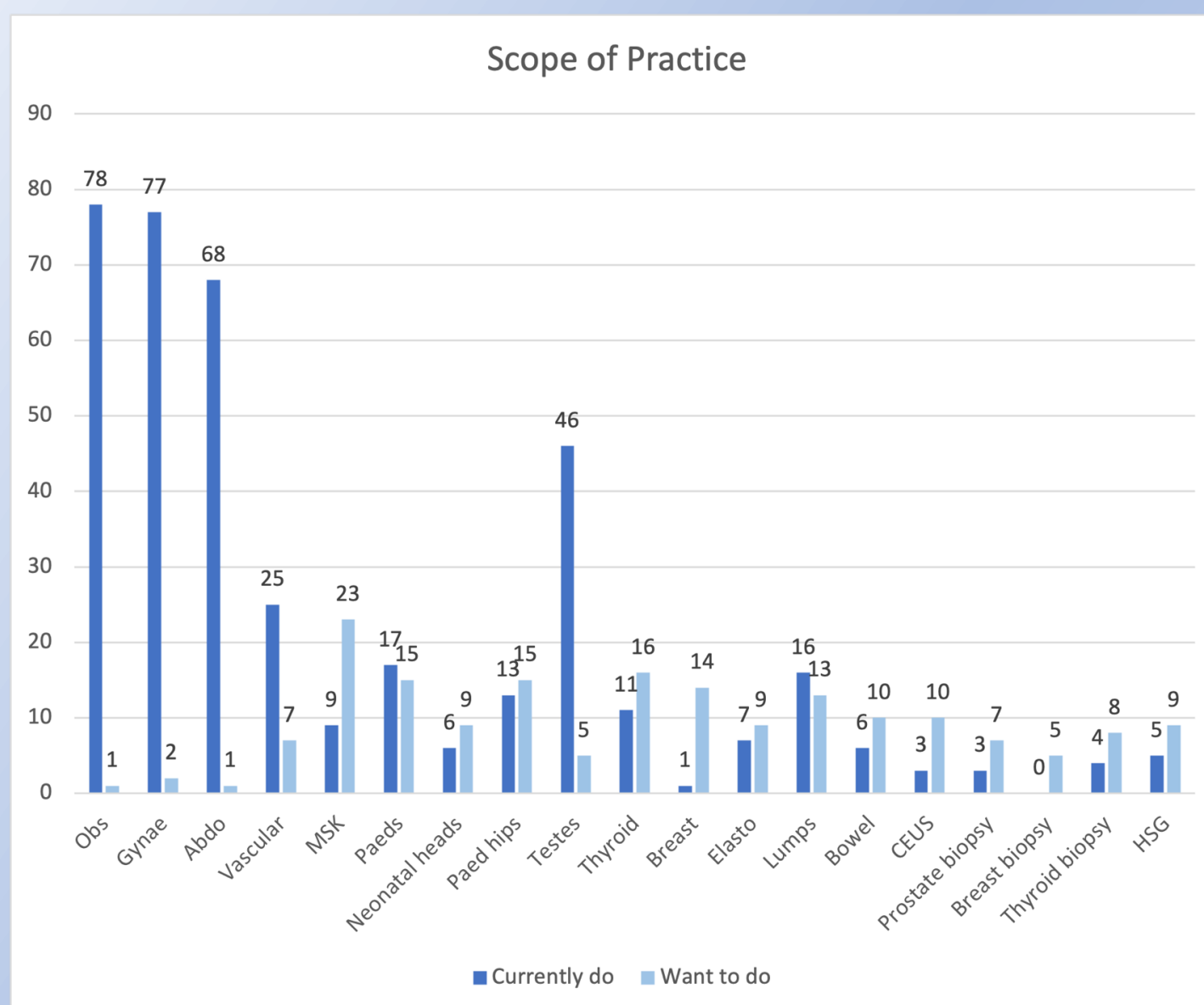
## Results Continued

### FOUR PILLARS OF ADVANCED CLINICAL PRACTICE

Only 7% of participants are fulfilling all four pillars of advanced clinical practice; clinical practice, research, leadership and education. 18, 14 and 10 sonographers mentioned a lack of protected time to practice education, leadership and research respectively. The lack of protected time for anything but clinical practice, exacerbated by the requirement for more staff (NHS England, 2020), appears to be restricting sonographers' development. If the clinical workload monopolises sonographers' time, sonographers will not be fulfilling their roles as advanced practitioners, restricting practice improvements and hindering delivery of excellent patient care (HEE, 2017).

### CAREER PROGRESSION

78% agree that opportunities for career progression make a good working environment. Many of the negative experiences expressed in open text responses relate to inadequate training and lack of support due to poor funding and staffing levels as illustrated in the following two sonographer's comments:



*'Everyone needs career progression to maintain interest in their career. However, with limited staffing often this provides extra pressure on staff and staff who are only partly trained being left to scan alone reduces confidence.'*

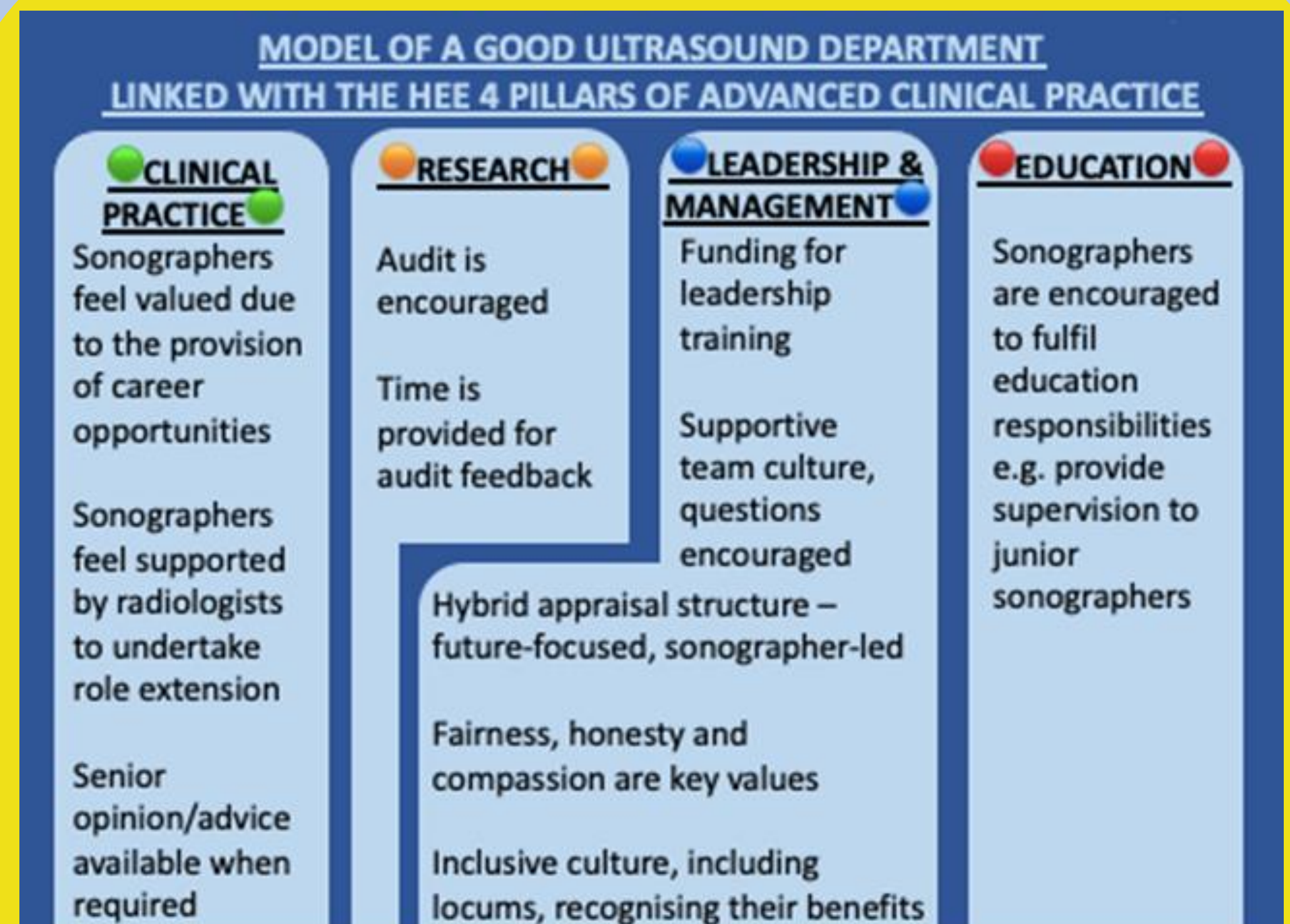
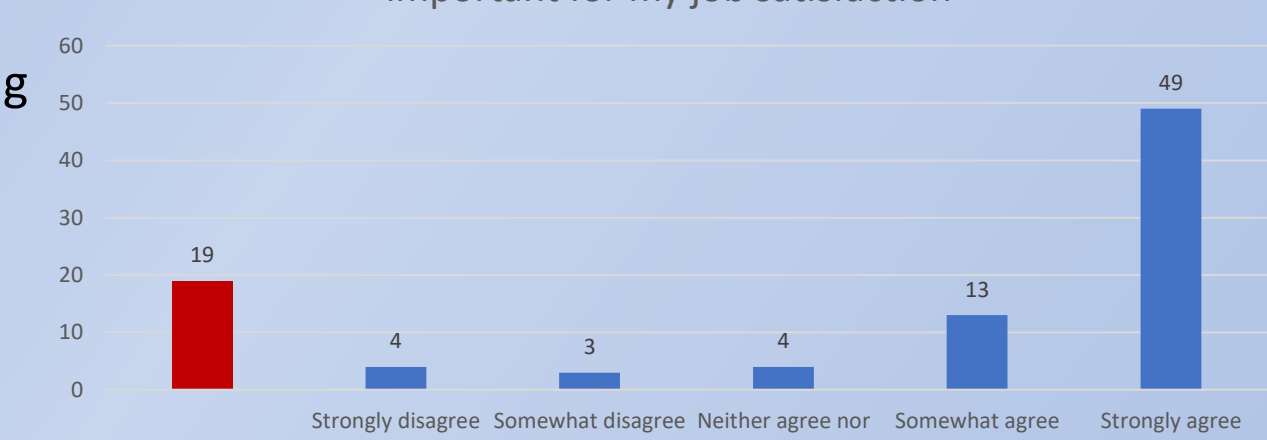
*'Very little career progression available due to lack of funding and time.'*

For many of the ultrasound specialties, more sonographers wish to expand their practice to include the specialty than the number of sonographers who are currently practicing it.

### FEELING VALUED IN A SUPPORTIVE TEAM

In response to an open question, 20 sonographers said feeling valued was an essential factor for job satisfaction, agreeing with current literature (Nightingale et al., 2021). 67% of sonographers in this sample somewhat/strongly agree that having a supportive manager is important for their job satisfaction.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement - Having a supportive manager is important for my job satisfaction



## The HEE 4 Pillars of Advanced Clinical Practice

### RECOMMENDATIONS FITTING UNDER MULTIPLE PILLARS

- Funding and time to complete MSc qualification – encouraging further progression e.g. consultant roles
- All sonographers given regular opportunities to attend MDT meetings – reduced professional isolation
- Protected CPD time is allocated to all sonographers on a regular basis, assisting development and helping to improve workplace culture
- A different sonographer each month leads group feedback session on an area of practice requiring improvement, encouraging leadership skill development and improving feedback
- Locum sonographers allow permanent sonographers to be released from scanning to have time for the other recommendations