

Regulating for the workforce of the future: addressing the healthcare workforce crisis in Scotland and Ireland

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Overview

- Project context
- Key themes emerging from research roundtables in Ireland and Scotland
- Project outputs
- Next steps

Project context: why professional regulation and the workforce crisis?

Almost 1,000 hospital consultant posts not filled, with some vacant for years, figures show

Over one-fifth of all posts had no permanent incumbent last month, a significant increase on 2021

Huge amount of Irish-trained GPs are emigrating abroad after they qualify here

As demand for doctors increases with population growth, new figures lay bare extent of general practice exodus

More than 40 per cent of doctors, 50 per cent of nurses in Ireland are foreign-trained

By Michael McHale 19th November 2024

'Overreliance on foreign-trained health workers risks exacerbating workforce shortages,' OECD report says

BreastCheck misses screening targets for second year running

<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/huge-amount-of-irish-trained-gps-are-emigrating-abroad-after-they-qualify-here/a1940940424.html>
<https://www.irishtimes.com/health/2023/07/09/almost-1000-hospital-consultant-posts-not-filled-with-some-vacant-for-years-figures-show/>
<https://www.imt.ie/news/more-than-40-per-cent-of-doctors-50-per-cent-of-nurses-in-ireland-are-foreign-trained-19-11-2024/>
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/aug/15/radiographer-shortage-in-england-delaying-breast-cancer-treatment-says-society>

NHS staffing levels are dangerously low - BMA Scotland

Scottish NHS in 'a state of permanent crisis'

Health service is 'massively under-resourced' with demand outstripping capacity, a leading doctor has warned

Radiographer shortage in England 'is delaying breast cancer treatment'

Urgent need to recruit more mammographers to enable disease to be detected promptly, says professional body

<https://www.thetimes.com/uk/scotland/article/scottish-nhs-in-a-state-of-permanent-crisis-0dpb6p8z3>
<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-67828648>
<https://www.rte.ie/news/health/2025/0825/1529967-breastcheck-hse/>

Project context : the workforce crisis as a global phenomenon

- The health workforce crisis is a global phenomenon – the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates a global shortfall of over 10 million health workers by 2030.
- Europe is: ‘facing a staggering shortage of doctors and other healthcare workers’ (Looi, 2024).
- Emphasis on ethical recruitment of healthcare workers (WHO Global Code on the Ethical Recruitment of International Health Workers 2010).
- At its most visible level, the workforce crisis manifests as a shortage of personnel, but we argue that it is best understood as a “series of crises”.
- As well as a public health concern, this crisis is of significance to the economy (McCarthy et al. 2025).

Project context : themes from academic literature

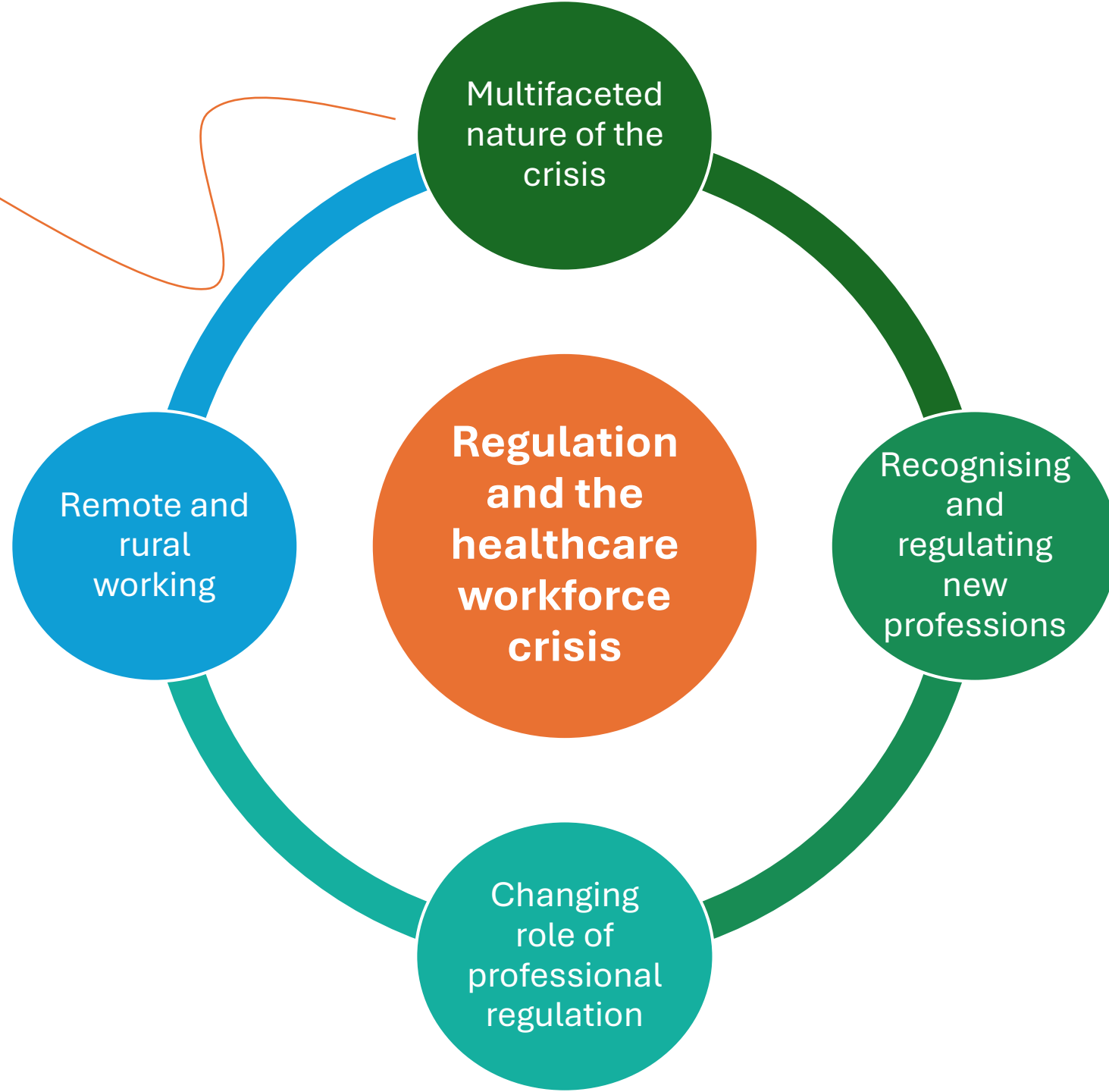
- Academic literature focuses on issues of employee *retention* and understanding the *reasons* why some doctors are leaving the workforce, including: job quality; work-life balance; and emigration. (Humphries et al, 2018, 2019, 2024)
- Impact of austerity on funding – even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Working conditions of junior doctors in hospitals (Lock and Carrieri, 2022).
- Pressures on primary care / GPs (UK GPs have higher stress levels and lower job satisfaction than comparable countries) (Dobson, 2023; aligns with SoMEP 2024).

Research roundtable aims

- Held in Cork (March 2025) and Edinburgh (June 2025)
- To better understand the tripartite relationship between:
 - i. professional regulation;
 - ii. its role in addressing the workforce crisis; and
 - iii. the promotion of a well-being economy*.
- To shape an interdisciplinary research agenda that identifies key ways in which regulation can help or hinder this crisis, with a focus on its role in the recruitment, registration and retention of medical professionals.

*A resilient healthcare workforce is central to a 'wellbeing economy', which values the ways in which '...the reduction of inequality and the improvement of citizens lives can make the economy more resilient' (Ireland-Scotland Joint Bilateral Review, 2021-2025.)

Key themes
arising from
research
roundtables





Multifaceted nature of the workforce crisis

- Not a single crisis that can be easily defined nor solved
- A multitude of crises with different dimensions in accordance with factors, including:
 - job roles
 - location
 - career stage and path
- Key role of accurate, timely, and comprehensive data
- Changing composition of the healthcare workforce – highlights the importance of effective inductions
- Wellbeing economy - draws attention to the quality and sustainability of roles to meet the needs of healthcare professionals, patients and wider publics

Recognising and regulating new professions

- Raises issues about the role regulation can play in effective integration
- Example of a different approach in Scotland (UK) and Ireland – statutory regulation of AAs and PAs
- UK: Statutory regulation by GMC, The Leng Review (July 2025)
- Ireland: Voluntary register managed by Irish Society of PAs, forthcoming independent review of the role due by the end of 2025
- Issues discussed have resonance for a range of professionals e.g. scope of work, team working etc



Remote and rural working

- A significant constraint to healthcare access in Ireland and Scotland
- Attention mainly on recruitment / retention initiatives, and support for telemedicine, for example:
 - In Scotland – Remote and Rural Credential developed by NHSES and approved by GMC
 - In Ireland – IMC update to telemedicine guidance in Guide to Conduct and Ethics (2024)
- A persistent challenge - but offers scope for regulatory innovation to support more flexible, responsive models of care





Changing role of professional regulation

How can professional regulation address workforce challenges?

- Collaborative working (both within and beyond professional regulation)
- Collection, analysis and use of data and insights
- Effective and efficient discharge of core functions e.g. see regulatory reform underway in UK and recent IMC research on reforming its complaints process (Department of Health & Social Care, 2023; IMC, 2025).

Can professional regulation influence workforce sustainability and culture?



Upstream interventions

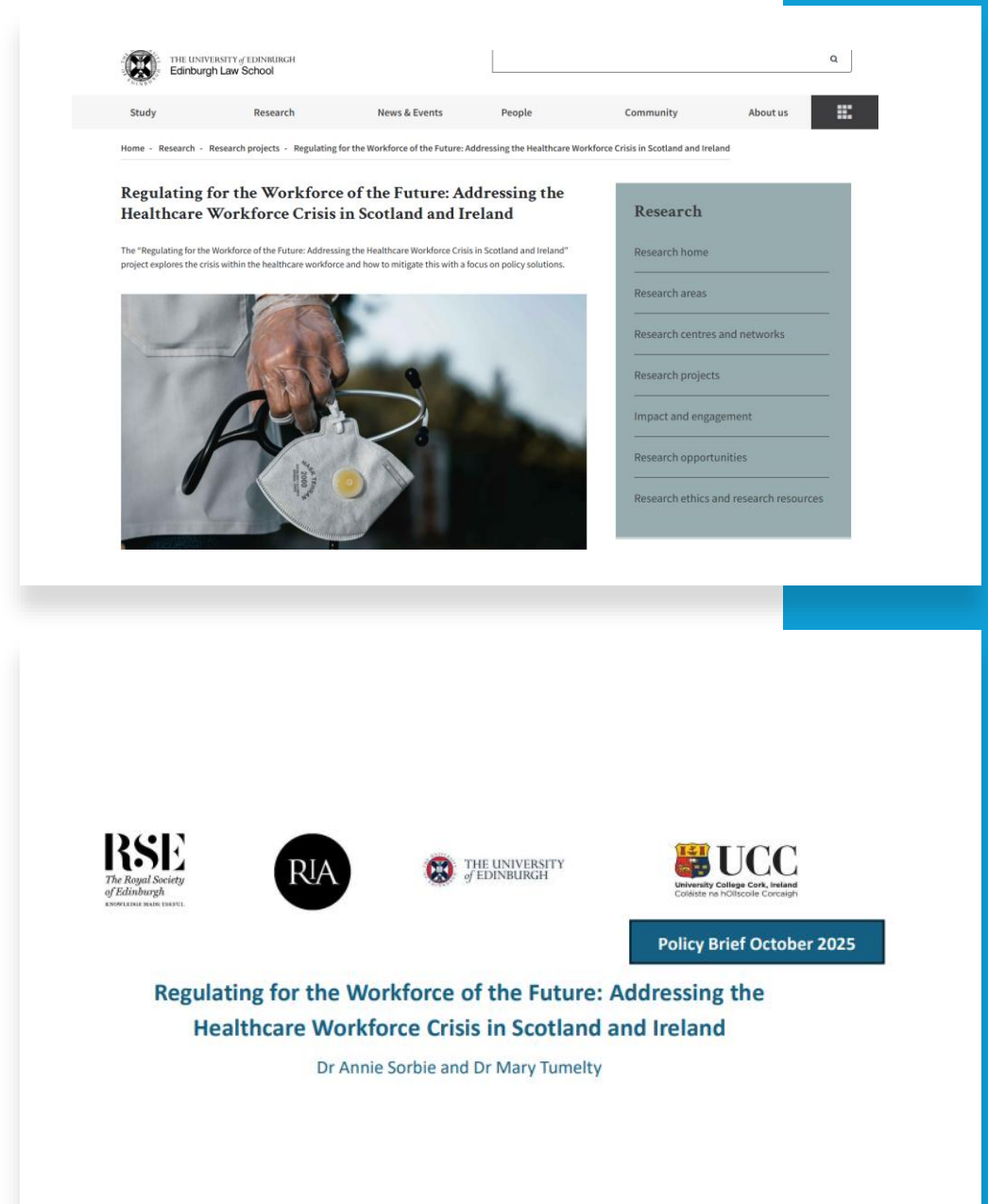
- Workforce sustainability and planning (PSA, 2022).
- Setting standards that embed diversity, inclusion, and wellbeing.
- Caring for a workforce under pressure' workshops, GMC Scotland

Downstream interventions

- CAREhub, IMC
- Using data on the workforce to highlight disparities and target support

Project outputs

- Project website:
<https://www.law.ed.ac.uk/research/research-projects/regulating-workforce-future>
- Policy Brief: [available here.](#)
- Blog
- Article (forthcoming 2026)



A 3D white speech bubble sign is mounted on a wooden stick. The sign features the word 'FEEDBACK' in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters. Above and below the text are two orange curved arrows pointing in a clockwise circular direction, forming a loop. The sign is set against a dark blue background with a white, torn-edge border.

FEEDBACK

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