



How can the UK stop relying on overseas doctors?

Pressure on healthcare: MW 513

7 April 2023

Summary

- In 2022, the number of overseas doctors joining NHS England outnumbered the number of British medical students to enrol in medicine courses.
- In 2022, just 47 per cent of UK-based medicine applicants were accepted, in contrast to 80 per cent of students across all courses.
- 46 per cent of HCCHS doctors to join the NHS in 2022 were foreign nationals, while 63 per cent of new doctor registrations gained their qualification abroad.
- At least 1,500 more people per year could be trained as doctors if the Government funded medical places in line with the total 2021 intake levels.
- Healthcare visas, issued for all medical and care occupations and including dependents, represented almost 90 per cent of all long-term sponsored work visas granted in 2022, and over half of all work visas when not considering dependants.¹

Introduction

1. Medicine is amongst the UK's most popular higher education course categories attracting tens of thousands of applicants every year who compete for 7,000 limited places in England and around 1,900 places in the rest of the UK.

2. However, the number of places has not kept up with the increasing demand for doctors within the NHS. As a result, the government have stepped up recruitment of doctors from abroad which has led to a significant increase in the proportion of overseas-trained doctors working for the NHS.

3. This briefing will consider: the number of UK and foreign medicine graduates; what impact this has on the NHS; and what can be done to increase the number of UK-trained doctors and reduce the increasing reliance on recruitment from overseas.

¹Home Office, *Why do people come to the UK? To work*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-to-work> (last accessed 24 March 2023).

Analysis

4. Between 2016 and 2022, an average of 37 per cent of Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS²) doctors have come from overseas each year. In 2021 and 2022, this figure rose to 44 per cent.

Table 1: HCHS doctors by nationality joining the NHS, year ending December 2020–2022, year ending June 2016–2019³

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
All nationalities	17,950	19,164	19,524	21,670	23,657	23,652	26,321
UK	11,875	12,351	12,312	12,873	14,290	13,176	13,516
Non-UK total	5,327	6,072	6,222	8,125	8,810	9,903	12,148
Of which: EU/EEA	2,212	2,252	2,036	2,113	2,077	1,940	1,955
Of which: rest of World	3,115	3,820	4,186	6,012	6,733	7,963	10,193
Proportion of non-UK joiners of the total (%)	30	32	32	37	37	42	46

5. This increase in overseas doctors joining the NHS was clearly deliberate. Skilled workers, including doctors from outside the EU/EEA, used to be capped at 20,700 per year. In 2018, however, following lobbying from various groups, including former Health and Social Care Secretary Jeremy Hunt and former Home Secretary Sajid Javid⁴, doctors were removed from the work permit cap of that time.⁵ Since then the number of doctors coming from outside the UK or EU/EEA has increased by 143 per cent, from 4,186 in 2018 to June to 10,193 in 2022 to December.

6. An alternative set of figures, however, indicates the proportion of new doctors who trained overseas is higher still. Looking at the number of first registration doctor applications granted by the General Medical Council in 2022, for instance, shows that 63 per cent of applications to register were granted to individuals who gained their Primary Medical Qualification outside of the United Kingdom.⁶ Unlike NHS joining figures as detailed in Table 1, this includes local General Practitioners (GPs), doctors working for private healthcare companies and those potentially not currently practicing at all. It will also involve UK nationals who gained their accreditation abroad.

7. Comparison of the number of overseas doctors recruited each year (see Figure 1 below) alongside the number of students enrolling onto medical training shows that in almost any given year a higher number of overseas doctors are being recruited than UK students are being accepted for training. Although not strictly comparable, due to student data being for the year ending August while the recruitment data is for the year ending June, this is nonetheless highly indicative of the trend of overseas recruitment outstripping domestic education.

² HCHS is the employment category used for doctors working for the NHS and thus excludes doctors who are not employed by the NHS, such as those working in private healthcare or as contractors like local GPs.

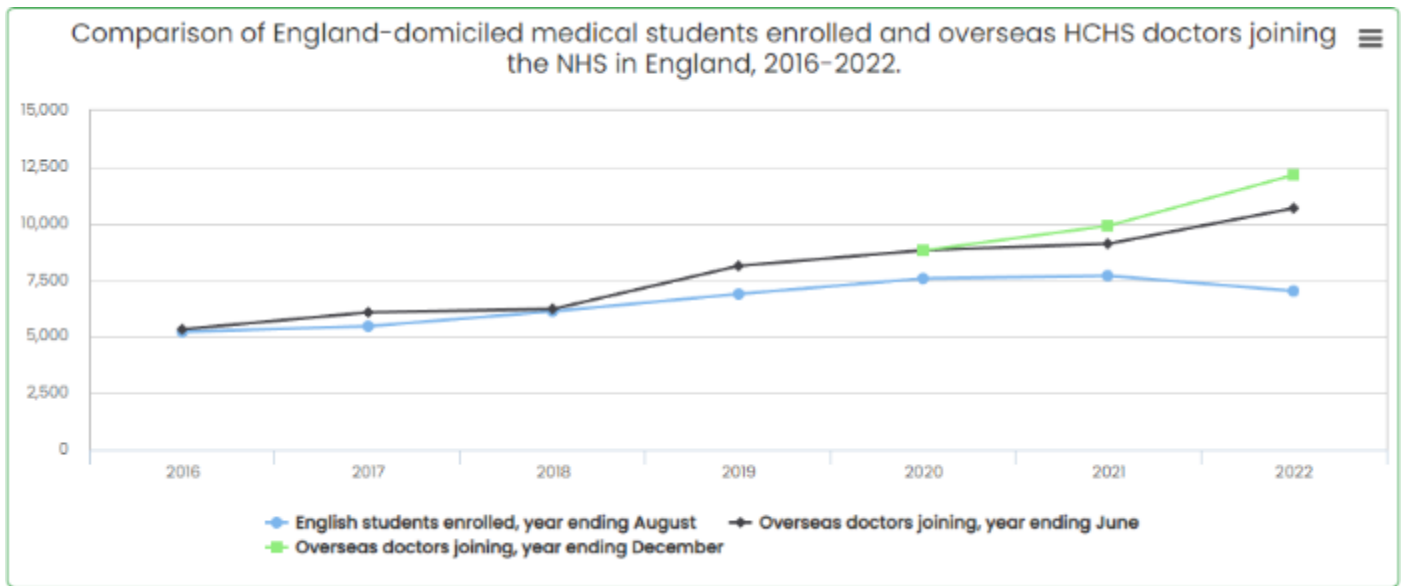
³ 2022 data: NHS Digital, NHS Workforce Statistics – December 2022, 6 April 2023, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-workforce-statistics/december-2022> (last accessed 6 April 2023). 2021 data: NHS Digital, NHS Workforce Statistics – June 2021, 30 September 2021, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-workforce-statistics/june-2021> (last accessed 6 April 2023). 2016–2020 data: NHS Digital, Freedom of information request NIC-409137-WIS2H, 10 February 2022, <https://digital.nhs.uk/about-nhs-digital/contact-us/freedom-of-information/freedom-of-information-disclosure-log/november-2020/freedom-of-information-request-nic-409137-wis2h> (last accessed 6 April 2023).

⁴ Campbell, Denis, The Guardian, *Government to relax immigration rules on overseas doctors*, 12 June 2018, [theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/12/government-relax-immigration-rules-overseas-doctors](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/12/government-relax-immigration-rules-overseas-doctors) (last accessed 12 September 2022).

⁵ UKVI; Home Office, *Doctors and nurses to be taken out of Tier 2 visa cap*, 15 June 2018, [theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/12/government-relax-immigration-rules-overseas-doctors](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/12/government-relax-immigration-rules-overseas-doctors) (last accessed 12 September 2022).

⁶ This data noted that in 2022, 7,819 first registration applications were granted to individuals whose qualification was gained in the UK, 2,033 in the EEA and 11,403 International Medical Graduates. General Medical Council, *private email*, 2023.

Figure 1: Comparison of UK-domiciled medical students enrolled⁷ in English medical schools and overseas HCHS doctors joining the NHS in England, 2016–2022.⁸



8. The growing tendency to recruit overseas largely stems from a failure both to train a sufficient number of doctors in the UK and to anticipate the increased demand resulting from a burgeoning population driven by immigration. According to the British Medical Association (BMA) the UK is short of 46,300 doctors in England alone.⁹ Other analyses have identified a need for between 5,000 and 11,000 extra medical trainees per year to close the shortfall.^{10,11}

⁷ Office for Students, 2023, *Health education funding*, officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/funding-for-providers/health-education-funding/ (last accessed 1 February 2023).

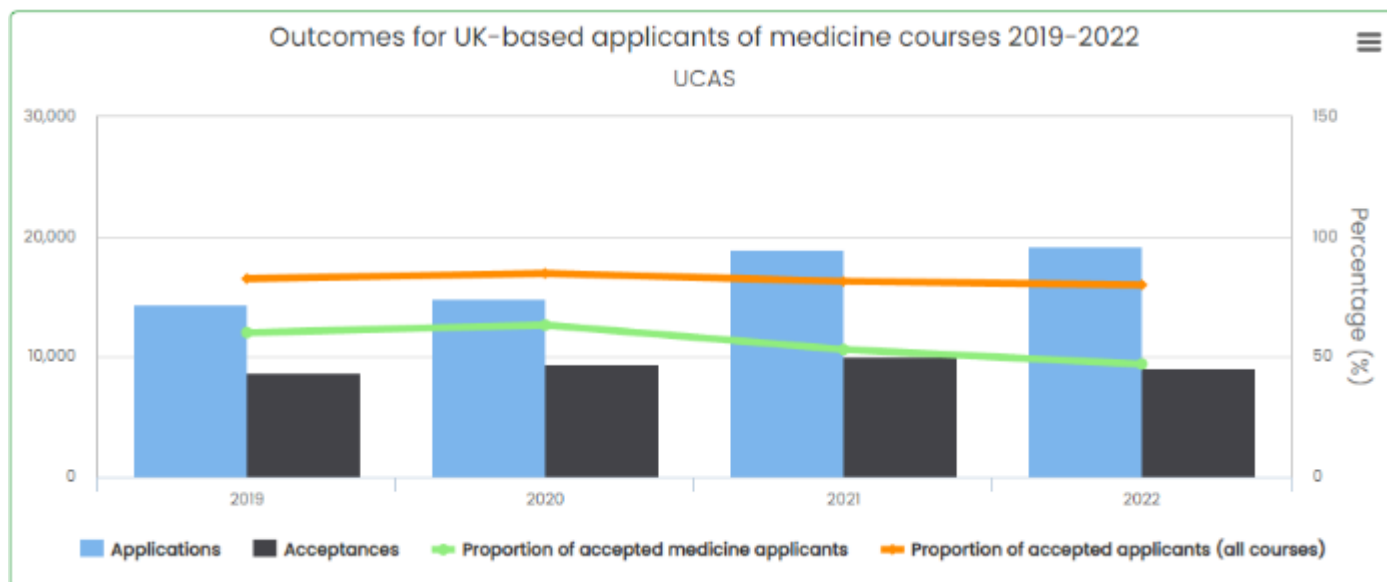
⁸ NHS Digital.

⁹ British Medical Association, *NHS medical staffing data analysis*, bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/workforce/nhs-medical-staffing-data-analysis (last accessed 12 September 2022).

¹⁰ British Medical Journal, *England needs 11 000 more medical student places a year, say doctors' leaders*, 14 May 2022, bmj.com/content/377/bmj.o1210 (last accessed 12 September 2022).

¹¹ Woolcock, Nicola, *The Times*, *NHS 'needs 5,000 more medical students'*, 20 October 2021, thetimes.co.uk/article/nhs-in-need-of-5-000-more-medical-students-xg6h7psgr (last accessed 12 September 2022).

Figure 2: Outcomes for UK-based applicants of medicine courses 2019–2022 – UCAS¹²



9. Notwithstanding the greater need, large numbers of would-be medical students are being turned away every year from medical courses for which they may be qualified, yet for whom limited capacity allows no space. In 2022, there were 19,235 UK applicants to study general medicine, a 25 per cent increase on 2020. Of these, 9,050 were accepted onto courses while 10,185 were turned away.

10. This has seen the acceptance rate plunge from 63 to 47 per cent in the space of just two years.

11. The high rejection rate is the result of the funding cap on government-funded medical training places which, in 2017, the government said cost £165,000 each (excluding student loans).¹³ The official position is that numbers are capped to maintain high standards within funding constraints.¹⁴ This policy leaves high numbers of students without a place at a medical school. As Consultant Surgeon J Meirion Thomas has said: “Tens of thousands of students with the required A-level grades and aptitude have failed to gain entry to our medical schools because places are strictly limited by cost.”¹⁵

12. One Member of Parliament, Anthony Browne MP, recently remarked that the majority of Bulgarian-trained doctors in Britain are not actually Bulgarian, but British graduates who had no option but to get training abroad thanks to the low training capacity.¹⁶

13. Table 2 below shows the total number of medical and dental students enrolled by domicile over the past decade. It shows how gradually the number of students paying ‘Home’ fees (including EU students prior to 2017–18), who are subsidised by the government, have increased very slowly over time with a temporary uplift from 2020–21 to 2021–22. It also indicates the upper limit of how many medical students can be trained in current facilities. Figure 2 below, displays the total of students paying Home fees.

¹² UCAS, *UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2022*, ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2022 (last accessed 24 March 2023).

¹³ Department of Health, *Expansion of Undergraduate Medical Education*, March 2017, p.22.

¹⁴ Woolcock, Nicola., *The Times, A-level results: Cap on medicine degrees may deny even A* candidates*, [thetimes.co.uk/article/a-level-results-cap-on-medicine-degrees-may-deny-even-a-candidates-dvzs8prjx](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/a-level-results-cap-on-medicine-degrees-may-deny-even-a-candidates-dvzs8prjx) (last accessed 13 September 2022).

¹⁵ Thomas, J. Meirion, *The Telegraph, We have become too reliant on foreign doctors*, 2 January 2022, [telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/01/02/we-have-become-too-reliant-on-foreign-doctors/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/01/02/we-have-become-too-reliant-on-foreign-doctors/) (last accessed 24 March 2023).

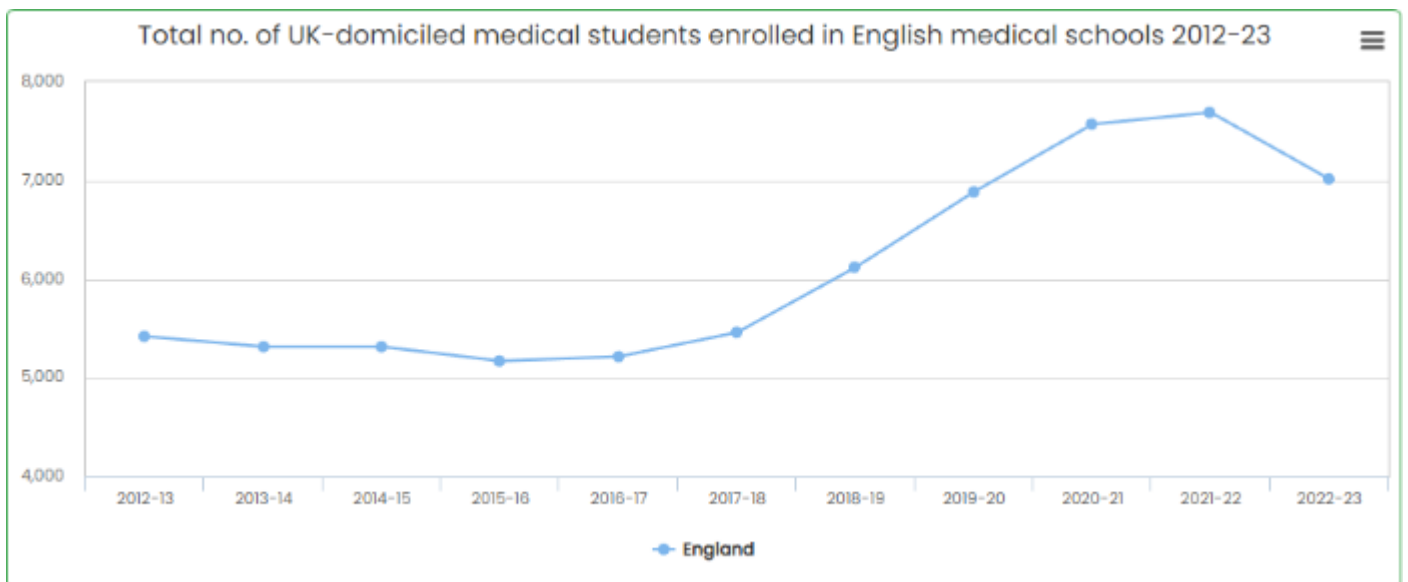
¹⁶ Hansard, *Doctor training*, 17 January 2023, hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-01-17/debates/F6AFE6A8-00A8-4DAC-9A25-880C66969A87/DoctorTraining (last accessed 1 February 2023).

Table 2: Total medical students enrolled by fee status and domicile, 2012–2022¹⁷

Year	Home students (incl. EU to 2016–17)						Overseas students	Grand total
	Total (excl. EU)	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales	EU		
2012–13	6,470	5,420	45	670	335	535	805	7,810
2013–14	6,310	5,315	35	630	330	535	715	7,560
2014–15	6,325	5,315	50	625	335	505	810	7,640
2015–16	6,250	5,170	75	665	340	530	735	7,515
2016–17	6,285	5,215	50	680	340	565	710	7,560
2017–18	6,890	5,460	230	825	375	-	770	7,660
2018–19	7,655	6,120	230	920	385	-	850	8,505
2019–20	8,455	6,885	235	955	380	-	910	9,365
2020–21	9,280	7,570	265	1,050	400	-	1,060	10,340
2021–22	9,535	7,690	350	1,085	410	-	965	10,500
2022–23	8,945	7,015	300	1,205	425	-	875	9,820

14. Between 2018 and 2020, the cap in England permanently rose by 25 per cent from 6,000 to 7,500.¹⁸ However, this was partly due to a fall in students from Europe after the UK’s departure from the EU (who were previously treated the same as British students). In 2020 and 2021 the cap was temporarily increased further to over 9,000, only to be re-imposed at 7,500 in 2022. Commenting, the then-Education Secretary James Cleverly initially blamed the difficulty of increasing capacity before later admitting that funding was the main issue.¹⁹

Figure 3: Total no. of UK-domiciled medical students enrolled in English medical schools 2012–23²⁰



15. As may be inferred from what happened in 2020–21 and 2021–22 when 800–1,000 more places were

¹⁷ Office for Students, 2022.

¹⁸ Triggie, Nick, BBC, *Student doctor numbers to rise by 25%*, [bbc.co.uk/news/health-37546360](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-37546360) (last accessed 12 September 2022)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Office for Students, 2023.

funded each year than 2019–20, it turned out that training capacity was actually higher than funding had previously allowed. In 2021–22, for example, the cap on the number of British students was raised and medical schools ran at (what appears to be) capacity. That medical schools were able to take on 1,000 more students without apparent difficulty indicates that real capacity was and is greater than funded capacity. In 2021–22, across the UK, there were a total of 9,535 British students enrolled on medical courses, as well as 965 overseas students. If the cap were to be permanently raised to this level of capacity, that would result in 590 more British students enrolled this year.

16. If, in addition, places allotted to overseas students were allocated instead to British students, that would mean approximately a total of 1,500 more places for 'Home' students per year. This is a low-end estimate as there may yet be further unidentified excess capacity, such as at the new Chester University Medical School whose 50–100 places, all designated to overseas students,²¹ are not included in Office for Students targets for 2022–23.²²

17. The same is true for similar new establishments at Worcester and Brunel universities, the latter of which will train over a hundred international medical students.²³ A notable irony exists in the case of Three Counties Medical School at the University of Worcester in having been founded with the explicit intention of addressing local medical needs.²⁴ Despite this, like many universities they have been strictly ordered by government not to train more/any UK-born medical students.²⁵

18. Such an approach would be entirely in line with the consensus reached outside government. Raising the cap and trying to train an adequate number of UK-based doctors is agreed with by the Royal College of Physicians,²⁶ the British Medical Association²⁷ and the Migration Advisory Committee,²⁸ the latter having said: "[We have] consistently emphasised the need to raise British human capital and thereby lessen employer dependence on immigration."

Other areas impacting the amount of doctors

19. A further policy change that would increase the supply of doctors, thus reducing the need for additional doctors from overseas, would be to end the 'pension tax trap' for doctors.²⁹ At present, because the pensions lifetime allowance has been frozen, many doctors are hitting the annual cap on pension contributions and finding that their tax bill is increased as a result, in some cases to the extent that they are effectively not paid for overtime shifts. This penalises certain levels of work and so has led to doctors working fewer hours or retiring altogether.

20. The government has sought to address this in the Spring Budget, which is scrapping the lifetime allowance, to encourage workers, particularly doctors, to work up to the retirement age.

21. An additional area of contention is whether workforce management is being hampered by the differing work preferences of male and female doctors. The proportion of female doctors to male

²¹ Fazackerley, Anna, *The Guardian*, 2022 hardest year 'in living memory' to enter UK medical school, theguardian.com/education/2022/jun/22/2022-hardest-year-in-living-memory-to-enter-uk-medical-school (last accessed 30 September 2022).

²² Office for Students.

²³ Griffiths, Sian; Yorke, Harry, *British students locked out of new medical schools*, *The Times*, 4 December 2022, [thetimes.co.uk/article/british-students-locked-out-of-new-medical-schools-t86lh897v](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/british-students-locked-out-of-new-medical-schools-t86lh897v) (last accessed 7 December 2022).

²⁴ University of Worcester, *Welcome to University of Worcester the Three Counties Medical School*, p.8.

²⁵ Smyth, Chris, *Stop training so many doctors, universities told*, *The Times*, 25 January 2023, [thetimes.co.uk/article/stop-training-so-many-doctors-universities-told-xd3p3p37q](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/stop-training-so-many-doctors-universities-told-xd3p3p37q) (last accessed 2 February 2023).

²⁶ Royal College of Physicians, *Migration Advisory Committee: response to the call for evidence from the RCP*, [rcplondon.ac.uk/guidelines-policy/migration-advisory-committee-response-call-evidence-rcp](https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/guidelines-policy/migration-advisory-committee-response-call-evidence-rcp) (accessed 29 September 2022).

²⁷ Migration Advisory Committee, *Skilled Shortage Sensible*, February 2013, p.58.

²⁸ Migration Advisory Committee, *Work Immigration and the Labour Market*, July 2016, p.32.

²⁹ British Medical Association, *End the pension tax trap for doctors*, <https://www.bma.org.uk/pay-and-contracts/pensions/pensions-campaigns/end-the-pension-tax-trap-for-doctors> (last accessed 26 September 2022).

doctors have reversed in recent decades. For example, just 27 per cent of registered doctors aged over 60 are women, while in the 25–29 age group it is 56 per cent.³⁰ According to one surgeon, this creates problems in the workforce as female doctors are less likely to specialise and prefer roles with a better work–life balance.³¹ Data from the Office for Students shows that 62 per cent of medical students enrolled in 2022–23 are female.³²

Conclusion

19. This paper shows that despite tens of thousands of UK medical applicants being turned away every year and widespread agreement that the UK has a significant doctors' shortage, Britain has failed to adequately increase funding for medical places. This has left the NHS with little immediate option but to attract doctors from poorer countries with greater health needs. At the same time, harmful taxation policies unintentionally encouraged some doctors to reduce their working hours and others to retire early. By scrapping these tax measures and funding medical training places to capacity, the UK could make significant progress towards addressing the doctors' shortage.

³⁰ General Medical Council, *Key stats from the medical register*, data.gmc-uk.org/gmcdata/home/#/reports/The Register/Stats/report (last accessed 6 December 2022).

³¹ Thomas, J. Meirion, *Why having so many women doctors is hurting the NHS*, dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2532461/Why-having-women-doctors-hurting-NHS-A-provocative-powerful-argument-leading-surgeon.html (last accessed 6 December 2022).

³² Office for Students, 2023.