

Developing the Evidence Base for the Specialised Foundation Programme: A Mixed Methods Study

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Background

The number of doctors who do research is falling. A common route into this career is the Specialised Foundation Programme (SFP). The SFP allows new doctors to do research alongside their medical training.

Medical students used to be selected for the SFP by a competitive process. Recently, this has changed. Since 2024, students rank their job preferences, then a computer system assigns them a job.

There is worry that this change could make it harder for students who really want to do research to get an SFP.

Aims

Our research aimed to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the new SFP selection system and how it affects medical students' future careers.

Methods

We interviewed 16 final-year medical students across England. They shared their experiences of the SFP selection & how the changes may impact their career plans.

Results

Students felt that the new system gave them less control over where they work and what jobs they get. Some thought it was fairer, but many felt it did not value their hard work and achievements.

Most students still want to do research, but the sudden changes have made them more careful about career planning. They feel it now takes more effort to do research as a doctor.

Next Steps

We will share our findings with the UK Foundation Programme Office and the Medical Schools Council to help improve the selection process.

What did our participants say?

Perceived strengths & weaknesses of the SFP recruitment process

Lack of Information damaged transparency and fairness

I don't feel like I was told anything at all. I got all my information from SPF from my friends.
If I had applied, and I didn't get the SFP and someone else got it allocated randomly, I would be a bit gutted.

Participants 4 and 10

Need for more choice over location and jobs

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I was hoping to apply for an SFP job but because of the new system, I didn't qualify for a [non-random] one. They said if I wanted one, I could rank it - it was a one in a million chance at SFP - or just give it up. (...) I could have tried it, but I needed to guarantee getting a job within [the area I need] and I couldn't give that up [for health reasons].

Participant 9

Widening participation clashed with academic rigour

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It opens doors to people who didn't have the time or the resources at medical school to do that. So, I think that's completely fair but, I think there has to be a bit more of a balance (to) reward people for having done the work (during) medical school.

Participant 16

Perceived impact of changes to the SFP on future academic careers

Impacted their motivation

I think it won't deter me. I think I'll definitely try to pursue an academic career later on, but it's just going to be a different path than my friends who are in SFP, but I know I can get that.

Participant 2

Questioned their investment

I've spent hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours doing this (research) stuff....Is that not important? Are you not interested in whether people have done stuff?

Participant 1

Ongoing uncertainty about the future

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Yeah, I think it has altered my views on the security of different routes and I would be really cautious of trying for any one path in the future. You know, knowing that it can change really quick.

Participant 9

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