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Creators	Haslam, Michael B, Flynn, Anita and Connor, Karen

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Access courses and their contribution to the widening participation agenda in the UK:

A sustainable and long-term strategy to address mental health nursing shortages?

Abstract

Reasons for mental health nursing shortages in the UK are many and complex. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to fill vacant posts whilst at the same time, negatively impacting upon the UK's international recruitment strategy. Whereas international recruitment is currently essential to reduce workforce shortages, it offers only a short-term solution whilst also potentially leaving lower-income countries with increased nursing shortages themselves. This paper considers that a long-term domestic approach to recruitment is needed to reduce future workforce deficits. It is argued that benefits of Access courses are increased if delivered by the University directly, as a familiarity with systems, the campus and supportive networks are promoted, and the potential for targeted support, increased. Further research is needed to establish the benefits. Access courses delivered this way, however, may provide a more sustainable solution to nursing workforce shortages in the UK and beyond.

Keywords

Widening Participation; mental health nursing; International recruitment; Recruitment; Transitions; Access to Higher Education

Key points

1. Reasons for mental health nursing shortages in the UK are many and complex. The Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need to fill vacant posts.
2. There are barriers to international recruitment, which may offer only short-term solutions whilst reducing the pool of skilled nurses in lower-income countries.
3. A long-term, sustainable, domestic approach to recruitment is needed to reduce future mental health workforce deficits.
4. Access courses are already an established way of widening participation to HE.
5. If delivered direct by University Faculty, may offer increased benefits through familiarity with HE systems and campus's whilst increasing potential for targeted academic support for those who may struggle.

Background

The importance of having sufficient numbers of nurses is well established (National Audit Office, 2020) yet, whilst there is no agreed measure of the shortfall in the nursing workforce in England, it is estimated that there are 36,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS (Health Education England [HEE], 2017a). The Royal College of Nursing ([RCN] 2016) estimate the figure to be closer to 40,000, leaving the UK with fewer nurses per capita, than European averages. During 2020, this issue has been further compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic hindering international nursing recruitment (Mitchell, 2020), whilst amplifying workforce deficits in the UK; resulting in those retired from the workforce and nursing students 'opting-in' to join a temporary register to tackle the disease on the front line (Nursing and Midwifery Council [NMC], 2020).

Reasons underpinning nurse vacancies in the UK, are many and complex. A recent cap on pay and unsustainable working pressures in the Health Service have resulted in a fall in staffing levels (Jones-Berry, 2018) whilst the country's recent exit from the European Union (EU) has resulted in uncertainties around the status of those nurses currently employed from EU countries (Murray, 2010). Furthermore, three quarters of the current UK nursing workforce are over the age of 40 and the numbers retiring are rising by 43% (Department of Health (DH), 2010). This deficit will need to be met by new recruits.

Whilst the introduction of new and diverse entry points and career pathways into nursing (Willis, 2012) are welcomed, these national figures are further compounded by a smaller number of applicants accepting confirmed places on undergraduate nursing degrees since the withdrawal of the nursing bursary (HEE, 2017a). A reduction in applications is particularly challenging for the Mental Health field of nursing; areas where there are issues with both recruitment and retention (HEE, 2017b; Green, 2018). This reduction will ultimately impact upon the achievement of those the priorities set out in the NHS Mental Health Implementation Plan (NHS England, 2019a) to recruit 4,220 more mental health nurses by 2024. This is to support ambitious plans around the expansion and development of essential services for those with mental ill health (NHS England, 2019b).

The decision to remove the bursary and introduce tuition fees in nursing in the UK was made with a view to developing a nurse education system that was sustainable, increasing the number of places available and providing flexible options to students (Willis, 2012; HEE, 2015). Nursing students now bear the cost of their own education, however, and are likely to qualify as a nurse having accrued a large debt. This is unlikely to be resolved through the recent introduction of maintenance grants available to support students from Autumn 2020. These changes may account for a reduction in the number of applications from mature students; a group whom are more likely to have previous experience in healthcare roles, particularly in mental health settings, and therefore bring valuable skills and knowledge to the profession. Mature students are also more likely to demonstrate resilience and the determination to succeed (Hinsliff-Smith, *et al.* 2011; Kiernan, *et al.* 2015) and therefore remain in the profession. Furthermore, a current reduction in the number of 18-year old's in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2018) present Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with further challenges in terms of recruitment to undergraduate nursing programmes.

International recruitment

The issues surrounding nurse recruitment are not unique to the UK. Globally, the turnover of the nursing workforce remains a challenge for all healthcare sectors and is exacerbated by an international nursing shortage. The Covid-19 pandemic has similarly amplified workforce deficits internationally, with many countries continuing to face an unprecedented demand and impacting upon the mental health of existing health care workers (Mira, *et al.* 2020). Countries from Canada (Campbell, *et al.*, 2020) to Germany (Lauxen, *et al.* 2019) are struggling to fill vacant nursing positions, particularly in hospitals and elderly care, and so have also turned to international recruitment as a strategy for securing labour. The increasing international migration of nurses, also raises the moral dilemma of reducing the pool of skilled nurses in lower-income countries (World Health Organisation, 2016) where the Covid-19 pandemic may potentially take more lives whilst impacting upon their ability to achieve the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015).

There are clear benefits to recruiting nurses from overseas; providing an immediate solution to shortages and ensuring that nursing becomes more reflective of the multi-cultural population that it serves. Barriers to overseas recruitment for the UK, however, particularly for those potential recruits who have trained

outside of the European Economic Area (EEA), include the two-part test of competence to gain registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), the professional regulator of nurses in the UK (NHS Employers 2019). Additionally, for mental health nursing, only a limited number of countries have specialised mental health nurse education, making direct recruitment more challenging. (Nuffield Trust, 2020). As a result, international recruits account for only 7% of nurses in mental health trusts compared with 20% in acute trusts (National Audit Office, 2020).

Having paused recruitment during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was recently announced that the UK will direct 28 million pounds into the recruitment of nurses from overseas (Mitchell, 2020). International recruitment to vacant posts in the UK, however, may only be a shorter-term time-limited solution and so it is essential that there is a supply of nurses graduating from UK courses and a focus upon retaining these nursing graduates. Longer term strategies, not just for the UK, may include adopting a model where HEIs and nurse training providers support more students coming through widening participation routes, whilst considering ways of reducing course attrition rates (Nuffield Trust, 2020).

Access to Nursing courses

Notwithstanding the fact that the Department of Health have been successful in widening access to nursing (Department of Health [DH], 2010; RCN, 2016), in the current climate, continuing to explore and support alternative ways for prospective students to access Higher Education (HE), remains crucial. Current routes into nursing in the UK require potential students to meet the minimum required academic level entry criteria of the University, excluding those individuals who do not meet this entry criteria for a range of reasons (Wyness, 2017), but who may still have the required values and traits. This is not to suggest that standards of undergraduate nursing degrees should be lowered, but that prospective students should be supported to gain the necessary academic qualifications and taught the skills to succeed.

Access courses providing alternative routes into HE have long been used in other subject areas; acting as the bridge needed for those who do not meet the academic requirements or have been out of study for a long time, to increase their knowledge and skills and to obtain the required qualifications to apply for undergraduate nursing programmes. Despite the falling number of students studying access courses

in general over the last few years, (Office for Students, 2020), 34% of students using Access courses entered HE in 2017/2018 to study nursing (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2019). These courses have the potential to boost recruitment to undergraduate nursing programmes, thus potentially supporting future workforce requirements. Additionally, through widening access to HE in this way, nursing becomes more representative, and able to meet the healthcare needs, of the diverse population that it serves (Heaslip, et al. 2017).

An example of one such course is the *Fast Track to Nursing* programme, at a University in the North West of England. This course is an intensive, 6-week Preparation for Higher Education programme, equipping students with the necessary academic skills and subject knowledge to study for an undergraduate degree in nursing. Successful completion enables a student to achieve a foundation certificate at level three, thus offering the required tariff points to be considered for a place on the associated degree programme, in those fields of nursing which have been traditionally difficult to recruit to (HEE, 2017b; Green, 2018). A distinct aspect of this programme is that it is both linked to, and delivered by, the HEIs department of nursing; preparing prospective students for University life whilst creating opportunities to offer targeted support to students who might otherwise have not succeeded.

Barriers to progression

The widening participation agenda targets those who are educationally disadvantaged (Graham, 2013). Attracting more people to nursing using Access programmes, therefore, will unlikely be suffice. Recent figures suggest that just over a quarter of UK Access students graduating in 2018 achieved a First-class degree; only marginally lower than the national average (QAA, 2019). For Nurse Education however, there is a paucity of available data on the effectiveness of these courses and subsequent participation in their undergraduate nursing programmes (Nuffield Trust, 2020). Therefore, an understanding of the factors that contribute to, and concerted efforts to reduce, attrition is needed (HEE, 2018).

Relative to associated careers, a high proportion of mental health nurses, in particular, come from less affluent areas (Office for Students, 2019). Furthermore, those students entering HE via non-traditional routes, are often from diverse demographic, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, which may impact upon the student's academic abilities and have influenced previous educational attainment

(Hinsliff-Smith, *et al.* 2011). Students entering HE via Access courses, may consequently experience tensions between their previous educational experience, and the current expectations and requirements of an undergraduate nursing degree programme (Haslam, 2020). It is therefore important that their additional support needs are recognized to both enhance achievement and progression, and to aid their transition to undergraduate nursing programmes.

Despite potential barriers to achievement and progression, anecdotal evidence and initial observations indicate that the *Fast Track to Nursing* programme has not only supported recruitment to the mental health nursing undergraduate programme but being delivered by Faculty from the Department of Nursing, has had a beneficial impact upon the student journey, increasing Learners' confidence and skills. The course may be regarded as an extended application and selection process, providing exposure for those students traditionally underrepresented within HE settings, to the academic environment. Just as HEE (2018) stress the importance of prospective students visiting clinical services to help inform their career choices, it might also be argued that Access programmes linked to HEIs, prepare students in the same way, going beyond the rehearsal of academic study skills. Just as important are the development of peer support networks and a familiarity with university campuses and systems, such as those needed for electronic submission of assessed work. Additionally, subject tutors can offer targeted support to students embarking on their undergraduate nursing programme and so supporting them to achieve their full potential (Hinton-Smith, 2012).

More research needs to be undertaken to explore whether any potential benefits of Access courses linked to HEIs, are sustained throughout the first and subsequent years of an undergraduate nursing degree programme. Further work is also required to establish whether Access courses as a longer-term solution to addressing the UK shortage of nurses, translate internationally to address the global workforce shortages.

Conclusion

Deficits in the nursing workforce remain a challenge, not just for the UK, but globally. An international nursing shortage has impacted upon the ability to recruit into vacant positions, especially for mental health nursing. Where the Covid-19 pandemic, may have highlighted the need to reduce nursing

shortages, the pandemic may be also viewed as an opportunity for HEIs and nurse training providers globally to engage with the widening participation initiatives as longer-term and more sustainable domestic recruitment solutions.

Access programmes, linked to HEIs could offer a substantial contribution to the widening participation agenda, particularly for those hard to recruit fields of nursing in the UK such as mental health. They offer an alternative pathway onto undergraduate nursing programmes for those prospective students, who have key attributes to meet the needs of the future workforce, but do not have the required academic qualifications, skills and confidence. Anecdotal observations into the student experience, on one such programme linked to a University in the North West of England have noted improvements in relation to prospective students' confidence, skills, abilities and achievements. Further research is needed, however, to establish the benefits, and to explore whether such initiatives translate internationally.

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