

Points of entry and specialization in nurse education: international perspectives

'Modernising Nursing Careers' heralded a review of the content and structure of pre-registration nurse education⁽¹⁾. Recommendations for change, however, must be considered in an international context in light of the Bologna process of harmonising higher education in Europe⁽²⁾ and directions being pursued in nurse education in other, non-EU, countries. Drawing on a comparative review of pre-registration nurse education in selected OECD countries⁽³⁾, here we identify key international perspectives and the policy considerations these raise for the UK.

Reviewing UK nurse education: the wider context

'Modernising Nursing Careers' suggests changes are needed to pre-registration nurse education as a basis for reforming the nursing careers framework, developing a competent and flexible workforce, and achieving the optimum balance between generalist and specialist roles⁽¹⁾. Any changes, however, should also encourage recruitment of the 'best and most suitable' people into nursing and ensure that careers and working conditions encourage retention⁽¹⁾.

Like the UK, many developed countries are in the throes of debate and change to their systems of nurse education and are also challenged by problems of recruitment and retention of their nursing workforce. In most European countries, including the UK, nursing is based wholly or partly in the higher education sector and so changes in the UK must take into account moves to achieve comparability of credits and competencies at first degree, masters and doctoral level⁽⁴⁾.

Our review aimed to identify how the four UK countries compared with others on two key issues: point of entry into nursing and specialization before or after initial qualification⁽³⁾. Information was obtained from 17 OECD countries (12 European and 5 others), selected for economic comparability. Sources included the literature, national and international professional and government websites and personal communication with senior nursing personnel⁽³⁾.

Initial nurse qualification: diversity of provision

Aspects of diversity

- 10 countries offer first and second level training, 8, including the UK, offer first level only (first level training leads to a registered nurse qualification and second to an enrolled or licensed practical nurse qualification)
- 13 countries offer one first level qualification: either a degree⁽⁹⁾ or a diploma⁽⁴⁾ while others offer two or three first level qualifications
- Most countries with more than one entry level offer opportunities to upgrade from second to first level training and/or from one first level qualification to the next e.g. associate degree to degree
- The range of further and higher education institutions varies from academically focused universities to more vocationally/practically oriented institutions (polytechnics, schools of nursing and colleges associated with universities).

Country variation

- Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland offer one entry point (3-yr. university degree). Other one entry-point countries include: Italy, Norway and Spain (3-yr. university degree); Ireland (4-yr. university degree); Denmark (3.5 yr. degree at nursing school in university college sector); and France (3-yr diploma at nursing school)
- England retains two points of access at first level (university diploma or degree). Switzerland offers a first level diploma and degree; the former based at nursing schools in the vocational sector. More commonly, two entry-point countries offer second level and one first level entry: Australia, New Zealand and Sweden (3-yr. university degree); Finland (3.5 yr. polytechnic degree); Belgium (3-yr. degree at nursing school in university college sector) and the Netherlands (4-yr. degree level nursing school diploma)
- Canada and Germany offer three entry-points; one at second level and two at first level. Canada offers a 4-yr. university degree and 3-yr. community college diploma at first level while in Germany there is a 3-yr. nursing school diploma and a recently introduced professional and academic qualification at several universities
- Japan and the US offer four entry-points: second level entry and three first level qualifications (3yr. nursing school diploma, 2 or 3 yr. college associate degree and 4yr. university degree).

Gaining specialist nurse qualifications

Diversity exists over the point at which specialist qualifications are gained; main models in evidence for first level training are:

Specialist qualification at first level after a direct entry course

- 2 countries have direct entry: Germany to general, paediatric or geriatric nursing and Ireland to general, children and general integrated, intellectual disability and psychiatric nursing. Some Canadian provinces offer direct entry to psychiatric nursing and in Italy, there is a contested move to introduce direct entry paediatric nursing

Specialist qualification at first level after a core plus branch course

- The UK offers 4 specialist branches after a common core: adult, children, mental health and learning disability.

Generalist qualification at first level after a generic course

- Most countries have moved from a direct entry model to a generic model. Some countries offer specialist options in the latter part of the generic course, in others all students follow the same generic course throughout.

Currently, considerable debate exists about appropriateness of different models for specialist practice and particularly in relation to mental health and learning disability nursing.

Policy considerations

The review of pre-registration nurse education in the UK will have to take account of recommendations resulting from the Bologna declaration to harmonize higher education in Europe and experiences of countries (EU and non-EU) that have different systems from the UK. Key issues are:

- What are the benefits and problems of the UK's unique system of specialist preparation (a 3-yr, core plus branch course)? Careful comparison of this with other approaches is required: direct entry; specialist options within a generic course; specialization only available after generic first level training
- Does more than one entry level encourage recruitment of a wider diversity of people into the profession than a single entry level?
- How can nurse education best be developed to facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications required for international mobility and at the same time be appropriate for the demands of health care service delivery in the UK?

References

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Key issues for policy

- The UK review of preregistration nurse education needs to be considered in light of changes taking place in other EU and non-EU countries.
- The 4 countries of the UK have a unique system for specialist preparation. Careful assessment of its benefits and problems is required if change is considered.
- Diversity exists over the number of access points to initial qualification. The effects on retention and recruitment of having more than one point and providing support for upgrading need considering.