

Informing *Modernising Nursing Careers* with NRU cohort data

'Modernising Nursing Careers' envisages changes in training and an increasing shift toward autonomous roles and away from hospital based provision. It recognises the importance of the image of nursing. Here, we draw together key findings from the Nursing Research Unit cohort studies on nursing careers in England. These focus in particular on aspects of pre-registration training, including the image of the 'degree nurse' and influences on choice in early career.

Diversity in the workforce

- Financial penalties associated with a degree course relative to the diploma may account for some of the less diverse composition of the graduate group
- It is not clear what proportion of current diploma applicants would be able to gain entry at degree level or would find this attractive
- The perception of nursing degrees may not be positive among all prospective applicants

Qualifiers from adult branch degree courses did not differ from those of adult diploma courses in terms of gender and membership of ethnic minority groups. Graduates were younger on average than diplomates. Those qualifying with a degree had entered nursing with higher academic qualifications and were less likely to have entered nursing without traditional academic qualifications. Nurses established in their careers thought that a move to all graduate entry would deter potential applicants, particularly older applicants. Graduate nurses were also characterised as lacking skills. They did think that graduate status would improve standing of nursing and justify better pay. ^(1,2,3)

Competence

- There is scant evidence to support negative perceptions of graduate nurses
- The evidence that exists is potentially biased by self-report and of questionable significance.

Self and line manager assessment of competence showed that both degree and diploma qualified nurses scored highly. Small but significant differences indicated that diplomates were more able in some respects but these would unlikely be reflected in observable differences in performance. ^(2,4)

Aspirations, directions and progression

- Experience in training is important in shaping career choices and is an important source of recruitment for mental health and learning disability
- Early experience also has negative effects and for graduates in particular there is evidence that career plans are formed that takes them away from some specialities
- Exposure to community work is important in influencing students to consider this career path
- Current student training does not leave students feeling adequately prepared to work in the community

A sizeable proportion of diploma qualifiers in learning disability and mental health began on another branch and were influenced to change by experience on the CFP. Course experiences of working in the community encouraged students to consider working in this setting. Care of the elderly experience for adult and mental health nurses made many less likely to consider this specialty. Similarly theatre experience had a negative effect on aspirations. Degree nurses were more likely to be working in A&E and Intensive Care than diplomates and less likely to be working in elderly, theatres and ENT. Jobs in the community or as practice nurses were identified as attractive, but few outside learning disability began their careers in this way. Students did not feel prepared to take up such a job immediately. ^(2,5)

Post-registration degrees

- Many of those who do not have a degree at qualification are likely to embark upon one in early career. As 'generic' academic components must be taken it could limit their opportunity to consolidate their clinical specialty
- Availability of opportunities to take a degree may influence diplomates' choice of specialty

A significant proportion (25%) of nurses with diplomas begin a degree course within three years of qualifying with many others taking degree level courses but undecided about committing to a full degree. However the majority take no degree level courses in the three years after qualifying. Interviews with established staff suggest that a degree is increasingly seen as essential for career progression in nursing and a useful transferable qualification. ^(3,5)

Satisfaction and retention

- Nursing is perceived as an attractive career by those taking degrees
- They are likely to be highly motivated and ambitious
- This enthusiasm must be harnessed if it is not to translate into disappointment.
- Current careers do not meet the aspirations of many graduate nurses who become dissatisfied
- In the short term retention is not adversely affected.
- Career guidance and opportunity to progress will be important factors in supporting a more highly qualified workforce
- Currently there is insufficient guidance available
- This may become even more of an issue for those developing careers spanning multiple employers and specialties.

Graduates appeared more career-minded than diplomates. They were more likely to have started nursing to gain a professional qualification and to have an occupation with career prospects. They were initially more certain about their career plans and initially express higher commitment to nursing but become less satisfied over time and express higher levels of disappointment in opportunity to provide quality care, pay, grade attained and educational opportunities. Those qualifying with a diploma show increasing levels of job satisfaction over time. Progression and educational opportunities are the same and so this seems to reflect higher ambition among graduates. Few differences were manifest in relation to actual retention up to three years. ^(2,6)

Career guidance is a positive influence on career progress and retention but is limited. Available guidance tends to focus on progression in a specific speciality and the 'next stage' rather than longer term planning. Interviews with those established in the profession identified lack of career guidance as a factor in considering leaving the profession. ^(3,5)

Key issues for policy

- Degrees attract ambitious career-minded nurses
- Experience in training and early career is highly influential on choice of speciality and commitment
- Early experiences deter graduates from entering specialities such as elderly care
- New nurses feel unprepared for community jobs
- Career guidance would be welcomed and may prove a positive influence

References and information

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The data-sets used are: Adult, child, mental health and learning disability branch diplomate nurses (nationally representative cohorts surveyed longitudinally by questionnaire at qualification 6, 18 and 36 months). Adult branch graduate nurses (4 cross-sectional cohorts, qualification, 6, 18 and 36 months, surveyed by questionnaire. Adult branch diplomates and graduates purposively selected and interviewed at 7 years.