

Career planning in a changing landscape: do nurses need support?

Radical changes in nursing career pathways are likely once the new frameworks emanating from the Modernising Nursing Careers (MNC) programme are implemented. Recognizing that nurses may require support in identifying and accessing these new pathways, MNC recommends development of 'career navigation tools' ⁽¹⁾. Drawing on evidence from the National Nursing Research Unit's cohort studies of nurses' careers ⁽²⁾, we consider challenges in developing career planning support programmes.

How are nursing careers changing?

Although long advocated, career planning support for nurses received little attention on grounds that career options were simple and turnover was high ⁽³⁾. Workforce shortages and increasing career complexity, however, led to recommendations for support programmes to facilitate retention as well as maximize career potential ⁽³⁾.

Changes in nursing careers proposed by MNC introduce further change and complexity: diversity of employers; truncating of hierarchies; expanding roles and pathways; more flexibility between pathways; increasing generalist rather than specialist roles; and progression linked to continuing professional development ⁽¹⁾.

These changes mirror those in many other fields where traditional hierarchical careers are being replaced by flatter structures and by more dynamic, flexible careers built on portfolios of skills that cross occupational and hierarchical boundaries ^(4,5). However, alternative career patterns may be associated with lack of accumulated expertise and financial security ⁽⁶⁾. Whether current changes in nursing will allow comparable upward mobility and attendant rewards as traditional careers is unknown.

Our six cohort studies of certificate, diploma and degree course qualifiers illuminate key questions for those developing career planning support policies (figures are presented for the range across the cohorts).

Is career planning support provided?

Support *during the nurse education course* comprised generalised guidance (information/advice) and personalised guidance (discussions about career planning).

- Findings for generalised guidance showed that: it was received by most students (54% to 83%) over obtaining a first job (vacancies, application procedures and performing at interviews); between 37% to 59% about the range of post qualification courses available; and 11% to 41% about course application procedures. Between 12% and 55% received generalised guidance about developing clinical careers but fewer for nursing education, research and management careers.
- Less than half had a personal discussion about career planning (16% to 46%)
- Support *during early career* distinguished between personalised discussion about next stage of professional development and longer-term career planning. At each career stage, respondents were more likely to have had a discussion about next stage (54% to 68%) than longer term planning (23% to 34%).

Is career planning support wanted?

There was unmet demand for support *during the course*. A majority wanted more information/advice about clinical courses (57% to 83%) and clinical careers (64% to 70%). Between 70% and 93% of those who had not had a personalised discussion about career planning would have liked one.

Unmet demand during early career was usually greater for longer-term planning than next stage of development. Frequency and content of career development discussions were among aspects of jobs with highest dissatisfaction ratings.

Demand varied by career stage and demographic profile: mature entrants were particularly likely to have wanted but not received support ⁽⁷⁾.

Reasons for not wanting support included concerns about impartiality and confidentiality indicating further unmet need.

Who provides career planning support?

During the course guidance was most likely provided by personal tutors followed by clinical staff and during early career by clinical staff including line managers (though formats such as preceptorship, supervision, appraisal and informal discussion).

There was little awareness or use of professional careers advisory services; however, discussions held with these personnel were more likely to have been perceived as useful than those with clinical staff.

Students, staff and those providing support expressed concerns about adequacy of training for the role, being up to date and having an overview of opportunities. Some thought employers should be responsible for providing support, others that career planning should be a shared responsibility, and others that it was their own responsibility.

Arguments have been advanced in favour of trusts introducing careers advice co-ordinator posts ⁽⁸⁾.

Is career planning support effective?

Little research has investigated effectiveness of career guidance generally ⁽⁹⁾ and in nursing in particular. Our cohort studies show:

- For the mental health cohort there was an association between receiving information about management careers and wanting a management post ⁽¹⁰⁾.
- Seven-year findings indicated that: provision of career support contributed to retention in nursing and lack of support to ambivalence about remaining and to decisions to leave. People worried about impartiality of advice and felt that employers might focus on guidance that encouraged retention and not necessarily on that in an individual's best interests ⁽⁷⁾.

Conclusions

- Substantial unmet demand for career planning support exists during the course and early career, especially for longer-term planning: this needs addressing.
- Provision of Support is primarily ad hoc and, potentially, by people not necessarily best placed to provide it.
- Trusts should develop coherent policies for providing advice and information about career options and one to one career planning discussions.
- Further research is needed to assess organizational and individual effectiveness of different forms of career planning support, such as joint use of career planning models ^(11,12).

Key issues for policy

- Career planning support may contribute to maximizing career potential and enhancing retention.
- The best way of delivering this is uncertain but current provision of advice is ad hoc, often unsupported and may be perceived as potentially partial.
- Demand for support should be assessed and targeted
- Demand for support is likely to increase as traditional careers and roles change

References and information

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