



The Open University: Tackling the nursing shortage

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Introduction

The well-publicised nursing shortage represents a significant issue for the health sector, both now and in the future. Faced with significant recruitment and retention issues, NHS trusts and Private, Independent and Voluntary Organisations (PIVOs) are experiencing widespread nursing shortages and system inefficiencies that ultimately put patient care at risk.

With the number of applications for nursing places at universities down, dissatisfied registered nurses and Brexit threatening the supply of workers from overseas, many organisations are forced to rely on expensive temporary staffing.

This report highlights the financial impact of using temporary staffing to address the shortage, as well as many of the factors driving it, suggesting that new routes into the profession, like apprenticeships, can help to plug the gap and future-proof the nursing workforce in the long-term.



Foreword

When it comes to nursing, it could be said that the UK is in the midst of a perfect storm. Stretched health services, the ageing workforce and the vote to leave the European Union, along with many other factors, leave us with a significant supply and demand issue – and it is expected to get worse.

The nursing shortage is a huge problem for the healthcare sector – but the knock-on effects are a problem for everyone. Without the right numbers of nursing staff required to run efficient services there is an impact on quality, increased waiting times, rises in complaints, and essentially patient care suffers.

At the crux of the matter are two issues: recruitment of new nurses, and retention of existing nurses. Since the announcement that bursaries for pre-registration nursing qualifications would be replaced by student loans, the number of applications through UCAS has fallen by around a third. This could mean that the pipeline of new talent in nursing is threatened, which could be further restricted after Brexit when we may not have the same access to international talent.

While there appears to be some indication of a decline in the numbers of new nurses entering the profession, there is also a growing number of nurses leaving the profession, partly down to the ageing workforce. These two issues combined mean that we have a real challenge on our hands for the sector as a whole.

There is also a retention issue across NHS trusts, driven by overstretched health services, reductions in funding for continuing professional development, and many nurses feeling unable to offer the standard of care they want to. These factors mean many nurses move around to get better benefits or pay, and this high churn means there are more vacancies to fill.

This leaves health providers with nursing vacancies that are hard to fill – and many are forced to resort to bank nurses and agency staff to continue to run safe and efficient services. But this is an expensive, short-term approach to plugging the gaps – and it costs the NHS nearly £1.5 billion a year.



Jan Draper
Professor of Nursing at The Open University

We certainly cannot allow this to continue. According to a series of requests made by The Open University under the Freedom of Information Act, if the hours currently worked by temporary staff were instead covered by permanent nurses, the NHS could save as much as £560 million a year. This funding could otherwise be used to pay for continuing professional development or improved services.

It is clear that there needs to be a sustainable solution that increases and enhances the nursing workforce in the mid- and long-term, to ensure that our health services are protected against future changes and hardships. At The Open University, we believe that the introduction of new registered nurse degree apprenticeships may help with this.

As the biggest contributor to the apprenticeship levy, which was introduced in April 2017 and costs organisations 0.5 per cent of their annual wage bill, the NHS needs to ensure that it gets good return for its investment. With the nursing profession in crisis, it seems that boosting skills by retraining existing healthcare support workers could be a credible solution to closing the gap and reducing the spend on temporary staffing.

The cost of the nursing shortage

As part of the research commissioned for this report, requests were issued to 241 NHS trusts in England under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, to uncover how much funding is used to pay for temporary staffing to plug nursing shortages.

With more than 38,000 vacancies for registered nursing staff (full-time equivalent) in NHS trusts in February 2018,¹ many have been forced to fill shortages through expensive overtime or temporary arrangements, paying for an additional 79 million hours of registered nurses' time in the last 12 months.

Data from the 146 responding trusts (61% response rate) reveals that collectively these NHS trusts spent at least £1.46 billion on temporary nursing staff, either from the bank – a roster of nurses that are contacted when shifts become available but can say no to the invitation of work – or from external agencies, but the real figure could be as high as £2.4 billion² if extrapolated to cover all trusts. If this £1.46 billion were reinvested then the NHS could secure the services of 66,000 newly qualified registered nurses³ – more than filling existing vacancies.

Temporary nursing staff are expensive. For every extra hour worked by temporary staff, NHS trusts paid an average of 61 per cent more than the hourly pay of a newly qualified registered nurse in full-time employment. Based on the difference in cost between temporary and permanent staff, if the nursing shortage was reduced and each of the current vacancies was filled, the NHS could save as much as £560 million a year.⁴

But it is not that simple. The demand for registered nurses is far outpacing the supply. The number of new nursing roles created between 2012 and 2015 increased by 8.1 per cent, while the number of new registered nurses only increased by 3.2 per cent⁵ – and with requirements expected to increase further, it is essential that these shortages are addressed in a sustainable way to reduce additional strain on the NHS.

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¹Calculations based on FOI responses. Full methodology available on request

²Calculations based on FOI responses. Full methodology available on request

³Calculations based on FOI responses and desk research. Full methodology available on request

⁴Calculations based on FOI responses and desk research. Full methodology available on request

⁵Health Education England (2017) Facing the facts, Shaping the future: A draft health and care workforce strategy for England to 2027

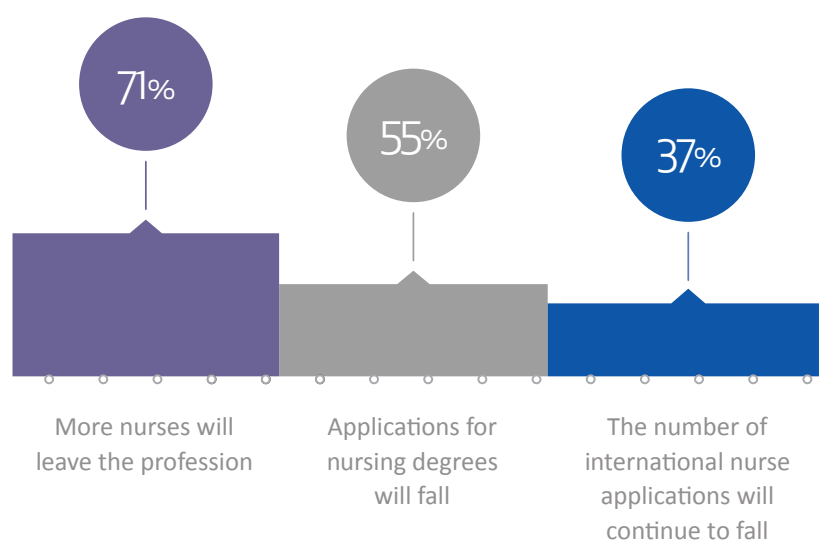
What does the future hold?

As part of its analysis, The Open University commissioned independent market research among 500 registered nurses and health care support workers from both public and private sectors. We asked nurses about their experiences, including the key issues they see for the NHS in terms of nursing supply.

Three quarters of registered nurses surveyed (76%) believe that the nursing shortage will worsen, with three in five (61%) expecting even more reliance on temporary workers from the bank or agencies in future. Retention and a fall in applications for nursing degrees are listed as key factors in widening the gap between demand and supply.

Many are also concerned about the effect of leaving the European Union, with half (48%) saying the nursing shortage where they work has already worsened since the Brexit vote. Nearly two in five (37%) believe that the number of international nurse applications will continue to fall, even though many (40%) believe that attracting international nurses is crucial to plugging the gap.

Predictions for the future of nursing





Attracting new recruits

More than half (51%) of registered nurses surveyed believe that the lack of recruitment of new nurses is one of the biggest factors impacting nursing in their main place of work. But there are a number of barriers to attracting new talent, the most significant of which is funding.

The end of bursaries

There are concerns that the introduction of student loans for nursing degrees has been a deterrent for many of those considering a career in nursing, young and mature students alike. Considering that only three in 10 (30%) registered nurses surveyed would have been willing to self-fund or partially self-fund their initial nursing education, the funding changes may have a significant impact on the nursing profession, although student loans are readily available.

With bursaries no longer available for those wishing to become registered nurses in England, the number of applications to study nursing at university has fallen by around a third,⁶ and more than half (55%) of those that were surveyed believe applications will continue to fall in future.

The rise of apprenticeships

An increased focus on work-based training and the introduction of new apprenticeships, like Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeships and Nursing Associate Apprenticeships, may go some way to opening up new routes into the profession. While it is important to acknowledge that apprenticeship levy funding only covers the cost of the training programme, and not salaries, the NHS is also the biggest contributor to the apprenticeship levy. NHS trusts must start to use this funding within 24 months or it will start to expire, and trusts will lose the opportunity to secure return on investment.

The concept of a Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship, offering on-the-job training over a minimum of three years, is certainly appealing, and seven in 10 (71%) of registered nurses, that were surveyed, agree that they could help to attract new student nurses to the profession, with three in five (60%) seeing them as a good alternative to bursaries.

⁶UCAS (January 2017 and February 2018) Applicants for UK Higher Education [Press Releases]



The retention problem

While NHS trusts are investing resources on supporting the education of the future registered nurse workforce, many are experiencing issues with retaining them, with many moving on to other trusts or the private sector, and some choosing to leave the profession altogether. With more than half (54%) of registered nurses surveyed identifying poor retention as one of the biggest factors affecting nursing in their main place of work, it is an important issue for the NHS to overcome.

Why are nurses moving on?

While nearly half of registered nurses (46%) are happy in their current role, our analysis reveals that a concerning number (34%) are unhappy, and half of these are contemplating either leaving for another NHS trust or leaving the profession altogether. Therefore, it's crucial that employers pay close attention to the issues that are most likely to see nurses move on.

One in four (27%) registered nurses left the NHS trust where they qualified for other jobs immediately after completing their initial training, while 43 per cent had left within 12 months. Although frustrating for NHS trusts, registered nurses are often moving on for good reasons; the most significant driving factor behind nurses moving from trust to trust was to secure roles with better training and development opportunities (27%).

However, the other causes of poor retention listed in the Health Select Committee's recent report into the nursing workforce⁷ – pay, workload and organisational culture – also feature highly. There are also other factors at play, including high expectations and location.

⁷Health Select Committee (January 2018) The Nursing Workforce

Pay and funding

More than half (51%) of registered nurses cited that funding cuts have had a negative effect on nursing in their main place of work, while 39 per cent admit they have been personally impacted by pay caps, which may push nurses away from the profession.

Workload

Three quarters (75%) of registered nurses surveyed say that staff stress and burnout is a problem across their organisation, while more than half (54%) admit that working long hours or being overworked is one of the biggest issues impacting their day-to-day job.

Location

Many student nurses have to leave their home area to undertake their pre-registration nurse education. After qualifying, 16 per cent moved away from the NHS trust in which they qualified in order to return home. More than three in five (63%) registered nurses believe that offering flexible distance learning would help to recruit nursing students from more remote areas and keep nurses in these areas after qualification.

Organisational culture

One of the fundamental pillars of job satisfaction is feeling valued by your employer. Unfortunately, more than two in five (41%) registered nurses believe that poor organisational culture is impacting on nursing where they work.

Professional development

Nearly one in four (24%) registered nurses say that falling training budgets (as a result of overarching funding cuts) have affected them personally, while a similar number say there are not many training and development opportunities where they work. Seven in 10 (69%) of registered nurses believe that clearer guidance and access to continuing professional development would improve staff retention.

High expectations

More than a third (34%) of registered nurses say that the inability to meet patient expectations is one of the biggest issues impacting their day-to-day job, while 21 per cent are concerned that they are not able to provide adequate care.

With the above issues affecting a significant proportion of the registered nurse population, it is essential that urgent action be taken in order to address the nursing shortage - currently one in three (35%) registered nurses surveyed will consider leaving their job if things do not improve.

The introduction of new Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeships, from providers like The Open University, may be able to provide a solution to some of the key 'pain points' for both nurses and NHS

trusts. By increasing the number of registered nurses through work-based training, and particularly the new apprenticeship route, NHS trusts may be able to address issues with workload and pressure, while also ensuring access to professional development opportunities. Flexible work-based learning models could also provide a notable retention benefit, as it would allow nurses to train near to where they are originally from, reducing the number who return home after qualification.

The Open University approach

Flexible work-based learning, championed by The Open University, provides a solution to the problems experienced by both nurses and the healthcare providers for whom they work; it allows nurses to gain skills on the job, inspires and motivates the workforce, breeding greater loyalty, as well as providing a sustainable approach to building skills and retaining talent in local communities.

As the biggest contributor to the apprenticeship levy, NHS leaders in England in particular need to ensure that the funding is used effectively. The Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship can deliver return on investment, offering the opportunity to develop new nurses while ensuring that gaps are closed using funding that is already ring-fenced.

Apprenticeships can also open up new routes into nursing, allowing trusts to retrain and retain workers within its existing talent pool, offering professional development opportunities to current health care support workers as well as attracting new recruits. For example, by using the funding to upskill healthcare assistants and help them to become registered nurses, healthcare providers can grow their own registered nursing workforce, while boosting retention.

Through apprenticeships, healthcare providers can take a sustainable long-term approach to addressing the nursing shortage. By nurturing existing talent, employers can invest in the future rather than relying on short-term fixes, allowing them to make greater efficiencies.

Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship

The Open University's Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship supports employers to develop their healthcare support workers (HCSWs) towards registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), as either adult or mental health nurses.

Based on The Open University's successful practice-based pre-registration nursing programme; a flexible, work-based degree that has helped more than 1,500 HCSWs register as qualified nurses since 2002, the apprenticeship can help NHS trusts attract and retain their nursing staff.

Programme structure

Throughout the four-year programme, apprentices will, on average, spend two days a week on practice learning, one day a week on protected study time and two days a week undertaking duties within their employment setting.

The Open University's technology-enabled, flexible delivery approach, supported by a network of nursing staff deployed across England, means apprentices are not required to undertake day release to attend campus-based learning. It also means that their study time can easily be adjusted based on service requirements, minimising disruption to service.

The core programme includes the following topics:

-  Person and family-centred care
-  Interpersonal skills that meet service users' needs for and rights to dignity and privacy in a compassionate and caring manner
-  Promotion of healthy lifestyles
-  Professional context of nursing and healthcare practice
-  Applied physiology across the life course
-  Evidence-based practice
-  Management, leadership and service improvement

Depending on the chosen specialism, apprentices will also develop skills, knowledge and understanding in either adult nursing or mental health nursing in accordance with NMC-approved curriculum.





About The Open University

For nearly 50 years, The Open University has led the way in innovative, part-time education, developing workplace learning and development solutions for employers (across the private, public and voluntary sectors), as well as educating individuals.

As a trusted provider of nursing training for 15 years, The Open University is committed to providing high quality training that can fit around nurses' and their employers' needs. The Open University's nursing degree has a 91 per cent satisfaction rating and a 93 per cent programme retention rate.

Specialising in developing high quality learning materials, based on rigorous research and industry insight, the OU combines academic excellence with technological expertise to deliver flexible, results-driven and truly engaging workplace learning solutions.

The Open University's flexible and adaptable approach enables consistent learning to be delivered at scale,

across geographically dispersed workforces, through having an online delivery model that uses advanced learning analytics to enhance the performance of business professionals.

Our well-developed blended learning approach enables us to deliver learning that is responsive to both organisational and staff needs, therefore maximising their return on investment.

For more information, please visit:
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Methodology

Tackling the Nursing Shortage was developed using the expertise and experience of The Open University's nursing department, in conjunction with Freedom of Information Request data and data from a commissioned survey of nurses and healthcare workers.

Freedom of Information Requests

The Open University issued requests to 241 NHS trusts across the UK in January 2018 under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. 61 per cent of these organisations responded to The Open University's request for information.

Nursing and Healthcare Survey

The Open University commissioned PCP Research Limited to undertake a survey of 500 nurses and healthcare workers in England. 250 of those surveyed were registered nurses. The research was carried out between 9 and 20 March 2018.

For further information including a full methodology and data breakdowns, please contact:

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