

Response to:

Health Committee Inquiry into the Nursing Workforce

On behalf of the *Healthcare Education Group*, we welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Health Committee's inquiry into the nursing workforce.

The *Healthcare Education Group* is a forum bringing together senior representatives from those higher education institutions in London that teach, train or conduct research in the healthcare professions. This includes nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions. The group discusses emerging issues in the delivery of world-class healthcare education, research and service delivery.

Since the announcement of the changes to funding arrangements for nurse training we have monitored the impact of these changes on recruitment to nursing (and other healthcare) courses in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across London. On the following pages we have outlined an overview of the current situation regarding recruitment to nursing courses in London.

Submitted by, and on behalf of, London Higher's Healthcare Education Group [membership listed in Annex A]:

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The *Healthcare Education Group* sits alongside the *London Medicine* group, which brings together the Heads of schools of medicine, dentistry and associated clinical academic disciplines in London. Together the two groups form *London Medicine & Healthcare*, which is a division of *London Higher*. *London Higher* is an 'umbrella' body representing nearly 50 universities and higher education colleges in London.

The nursing workforce – current trends in recruitment to nursing courses in London

Introduction

Healthcare Education Group (HEG) members offer courses in nursing, midwifery and allied health disciplines throughout London and the surrounding area. Upon the 2015 announcement that healthcare courses would move from a bursary-funded system to one that is fee-based, HEG members were naturally apprehensive as to how the changes would affect recruitment to their healthcare programmes.

In order to enable the group to gain an understanding of the pan-London perspective we conducted two surveys of HEG members' recruitment. The first of these surveys took place in December 2016-January 2017 and the second took place in August-September 2017. The surveys were fully anonymised so that HEIs could share details of their ongoing recruitment cycle that they might not be willing to share publically. Across the two surveys 10 HEIs submitted details of their situation regarding recruitment to healthcare courses at their higher education institution (HEI), for courses starting in autumn 2017.

Overview – recruitment to healthcare courses

In January 2017 the majority of HEIs who responded to our survey reported that there had been a fall in demand for healthcare courses starting in autumn 2017, when compared with the previous year. The level of this fall in demand varied; some HEIs stated that demand was only slightly down on the previous year, whilst others had seen falls of up to 20-25%.

Although initial numbers of applications were down many HEIs stated that the overall quality of applications remained relatively steady, when compared with previous years. This meant that fewer applicants were unsuccessful prior to interview. For many respondents this resulted in HEIs making a similar number of offers compared to the previous year.

In terms of acceptances to healthcare courses starting in autumn 2017, in September 2017 some HEG members reported that their healthcare courses had achieved a similar amount of acceptances, as compared to the previous year, however other HEG members reported that acceptances were down on the previous year.

The four strands of nursing

In January 2017 a clear majority of HEG members reported that applications for autumn 2017 had been broadly down across all healthcare subjects.

By the time of our second survey in September 2017 many HEIs stated that some courses which had initially experienced low demand had picked up during the latter part of the recruitment cycle and during the Clearing process. Mental health nursing was cited as one course where HEIs have been generally able to fully recruit to targets.

However, some HEIs highlighted Adult nursing and Learning Disability nursing as courses where there was an under-recruitment. In some cases HEIs did manage to recruit to target but reported that it had been a struggle compared with previous years, for instance one HEI stated that they had taken Child nursing into Clearing for the first time.

Postgraduate courses

Postgraduate courses such as the postgraduate diploma in nursing (PGDip) are not subject to the same funding changes affecting undergraduate healthcare courses from autumn 2017. The two surveys revealed a mixed picture regarding demand for postgraduate courses in nursing (and other healthcare subjects). Some HEIs reported a strong demand for postgraduate healthcare courses, with some courses being oversubscribed. However, other HEIs reported that demand for postgraduate nursing courses had fallen, significantly in some cases. Likely related to this, some HEIs stated that there was confusion amongst prospective students, with some prospective applicants not fully understanding which courses would be affected by the funding changes.

Looking forward, HEIs are concerned that the continuing uncertainty regarding the funding of postgraduate healthcare courses from autumn 2018 onwards is affecting the ongoing marketing and recruitment for these courses.

Impacts on different groups of potential students

In January 2017 a clear majority of HEIs reported that conversations and other interactions with prospective students revealed that many were hesitant about the new system of funding for healthcare courses. Prospective mature students in particular were concerned about the prospect of taking on loans and getting into debt, while on the whole younger applicants were less deterred in making an application.

By the time of the second survey in September 2017 the majority of HEG members confirmed that a decrease in the number of applications from mature students had materialised. Additionally, some HEIs reported that the number of applications from individuals with BTEC qualifications had fallen, when compared with the previous year.

Other comments

Some HEIs stated that many prospective applicants do not fully understand the new funding landscape for nursing and other healthcare subjects. Additionally, there are still some unknowns regarding the funding for postgraduate courses from 2018 onwards. This uncertainty about funding is causing difficulties for HEIs who now need to market their 2018 healthcare courses.

HEG members have also expressed concern as to what the attrition rate might be for the cohort of students who have begun nursing and other healthcare courses in autumn 2017, and are therefore the first cohort subject to the new funding regime. These students will soon be embarking on their first clinical placements, and so may feel as though they are helping to provide a service and 'working' for the NHS, but without the 'payment' that the bursary represented to students studying under the previous funding system. It will be important to monitor the impact of the funding changes on student retention over the coming months and years.

Conclusions

Recruitment to nursing courses across the capital has been affected by changes to the funding of healthcare courses, with many (but not all) HEIs in London and the surrounding area who responded to our survey experiencing falls in demand for nursing courses. Interestingly these falls have not been confined to the undergraduate courses where there has been a move to a loan-based funding system

– many HEIs have also seen a fall in demand for postgraduate courses. A trend experienced across London’s HEIs has been a fall in the number of mature students applying for nursing courses.

As of October 2017 key concerns for HEG members are the continued uncertainty regarding funding for postgraduate courses from autumn 2018 onwards, and also the potential attrition rate for those students who have started nursing courses in autumn 2017.

Annex A: Healthcare Education Group Membership 2017/18

Institutions/Organisations

Anglia Ruskin University
Brunel University London
Bucks New University
City University London
King's College London
Kingston University and St George's University of London
London South Bank University
Middlesex University London
University of East London
University of Greenwich
University of Hertfordshire
University of West London

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