

Written evidence submitted by The Council of Deans (EPW0065)

Introduction

1. The Council of Deans of Health represents 102 university faculties engaged in education and research for nurses, midwives and allied health profession students – with almost all UK-domiciled students of these courses studying at one of our members.
2. At any one time our members are teaching 200,000 students¹ - the future healthcare workforce of the NHS, private and charitable sectors. Of these, just under 170,000 are being taught in England.
3. The English healthcare education workforce is critical to the delivery of the overall healthcare workforce in England. The Council, and our members, works with Health Education England, NHS England and Government – at national and regional levels – to achieve this.
4. The Council of Deans of Health is grateful to the Committee's expert panel for the opportunity to give evidence on this important topic, assessing the progress made by the Government in England's NHS. This submission will focus particularly on the panel's interest in workforce growth.

Healthcare education – a snapshot

Healthcare students

5. UCAS data released in January 2022² indicated a general trend for sustained growth in both nursing and midwifery courses. While lower than 2021's figures, which saw particularly high rates of application across higher education courses, the numbers are an increase on the 2020 release and UCAS has noted that last year's application rates across the whole sector were 'atypical'.
6. The number of applicants to nursing courses for providers in England decreased by 8% compared to 2021 and increased by 25% compared to 2020 and the number of applicants to midwifery courses for providers in England decreased by 9% compared to 2021 and increased by 27% compared to 2020.
7. Recently released HESA 2020/21 figures show 168,305 healthcare students currently studying in England, 95.4% of which are from the UK, 1.2% from the EU and 3.3% from outside the EU³. This continues a trend of EU student numbers slowly decreasing while those from outside the EU have grown steadily.
8. Healthcare courses remain overwhelmingly taken by female students with 83.7% of them taken up by women. 34.3% of those undertaking healthcare courses are over 30 compared to 21% across higher education. 65% of those enrolled in healthcare courses are white.

Healthcare educators

¹ HESA data 2020-21 student record

² UCAS 2022 Cycle Applicant Figures – 26 January Deadline

³ HESA data 2020-21 student record

9. The latest HESA data⁴ shows there are 8,888 nursing, midwifery and allied health professional staff teaching at English universities. This is only marginally up from 8,612 in 2019-20 so while healthcare education staff numbers have increased over three years this has not been in line with the larger growth in student numbers.
10. The number of clinical academic nurses and midwives, and allied health professions has actually decreased over three years. With clinical academic AHPs decreasing from 50 in 2018-19, to 39 in 2019-20 to just 36 in 2020-21. Similarly clinical academic nurses and midwives have gone from 177 in 2018-19, to 143 in 2019-20, with 130 in 2020-21.
11. Over 40% of healthcare education staff are over 50 years of age.

Healthcare education – analysis and recommendations

12. While the sustained growth in overall healthcare student numbers is undoubtedly positive the topline picture can mask lower enrollment for education in some professions such as mental health nursing that will struggle to deliver the workforce without increased student take-up.
13. 20% of NHS nurses are, or were originally, non-UK nationals⁵. Their contribution is immense but England should not be reliant on nurses educated overseas to fill gaps or reach the 50,000 target where untapped domestic talent could. A sustainable NHS model could also achieve Government aims of levelling up people and communities by ensuring more British nationals are educated in healthcare courses.
 - **We recommend a dedicated campaign and/or resource to highlight the full range of NHS professions with targeted support and incentives for those particularly vulnerable.**
 - **Continued work on widening participation should be maintained and multiple routes of entry to healthcare degree-level courses maintained and adequately funded.**
14. Another challenge of student growth is the delivery of high cost high quality courses with frozen tuition fees during a time of high inflation and cost-of-living challenges affecting institutions, staff and students.
 - **Investment is needed for facilities and technology to accommodate greater numbers and educate at scale using the latest innovative approaches. An increase in students requires the appropriate space, expertise and equipment to deliver a quality education.**
 - **We welcome assurances from the Government that courses that support the NHS will continue to attract priority funding via the Office for Students but recommend better join-up between the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care to ensure the future workforce is funded properly during this time with scope to top-up funding where needed.**

⁴ HESA 2020-21 staff record

⁵ NHS staff from overseas statistics, House of Commons Library, 2021

- **Attracting and retaining students from less advantaged backgrounds could be a particular challenge in the current circumstances so we also recommend collaboration between the departments with universities and the OfS to assess what more can be done to support them.**
15. Student growth also poses challenges for an ageing education workforce that is not growing at the same pace. This is exacerbated by the decline in clinical academics who combine working practice and teaching to the benefit of students.
- **All plans for increasing the size of the future healthcare workforce require an essential component that recognises a concomitant need to increase capacity in the healthcare *education* workforce. To deliver quantity without impacting quality, educators need more resources and funding.**
 - **We recommend a renewed focus on support and routes for clinical academics as well as supporting overall NHS retention and healthcare education by giving healthcare staff the support to pivot into teaching.**
16. In parallel to this, however, the enrollment of mature applicants onto healthcare courses opens career paths for people later in life and in turn brings their experience to these professions.
17. While our members educate the next generation of NHS healthcare staff they also have a role in the continuing education of current staff – providing routes to new roles in the NHS. With 27,133 professionals leaving the NMC register in 2021–2022⁶ it is crucial to look at ways to retain staff, including via ongoing learning and different NHS careers.
- **We welcome the Lifelong Loan Entitlement and recommend the development of later life NHS careers is factored into its deployment. The role it could also play in advancing practice and developing the skills of existing NHS healthcare workers could also open up new paths and support retention.**
 - **We recommend a renewed focus on clinical academic careers as a way to both offer a different pathway to NHS clinicians considering their future and to help educate the upcoming generation of new healthcare staff. An England-wide approach to preceptorship could further help retention and set-out the different routes available to newly qualified healthcare professionals.**
18. Agile and proportionate regulation is going to be essential as we look to the future workforce. Keeping students and patients safe is obviously paramount but when regulation becomes outdated, burdensome or even contradictory (in the case of multiple regulators overseeing an institution) there must be scope to revise. Our members see an opportunity in embracing innovation and moving beyond the inherited EU Nursing Directive that currently restricts the role of simulation in nursing and midwifery education.
- **We recommend embracing a Brexit opportunity by moving beyond the EU Nursing Directive and updating the legislation underpinning the NMC’s approach to standards as well as a review of the overall approach to regulation in healthcare education.**

⁶ The NMC register 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022

- An increased use of simulated learning complements face-to-face practice placements, allowing in-depth preparation for numerous scenarios. Over the course of the pandemic it was used in areas where placements were limited, increasing its use could also open up placement capacity in parts of the country where this is limited.
- Such an approach requires proportionate funding in placement tariff and staff to educate students in this latest technology. An evidence base will also help the Government in making decisions on this and the Council is working with Health Education England to look at such approaches to technology and competency-based learning in Australia and California.

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