



Learning disability nursing meeting report

Report of the learning disability nursing meeting 16 November 2017

The Council of Deans of Health convened a roundtable meeting on 16 November 2017 to discuss members' serious concerns about learning disability nursing recruitment. Members from across England were joined by guests from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), NHS England and Health Education England. The meeting was facilitated by Jackie Kelly, Dean of School of Health and Social Work, University of Hertfordshire (who is herself a learning disability nurse).

Context

Learning disability nursing has faced recruitment challenges for some years but these have been more pronounced in 2017 following the sector's funding reforms.

There is no publicly available national data on applications to learning disability nursing pre-registration courses in 2017, though we do have data for nursing applications across the four fields of nursing combined. [Better data will be available at the end of 2017] Council of Deans of Health members have however raised particular concerns about drops in applications to learning disability nursing courses.

The average age of students on learning disability nursing courses is higher than the average age of the general student body. In 2015/16, 39% of learning disability nursing students were aged 30 or over and 56% 25 and over (compared to a sector average of 21% and 32% respectively). Many students choose to enter learning disability nursing as a second career or as a result of personal exposure to the profession, perhaps because they have children or family members with learning disabilities. Older students are thought to be more debt adverse. UCAS data shows that for the 2017 cycle the number of placed nursing applicants aged 25+ fell 11% compared to 2016.

Challenges facing learning disability nursing

Council of Deans of Health members discussed the challenges facing learning disability nursing:

Workforce needs

There is little published data on vacancy rates in the learning disability workforce but universities work very closely with local service providers and report acute workforce shortages in this sector. Trusts say they want to invest in this workforce but do not normally have the funding to support students. The apprenticeship levy may offer opportunities for recruitment to the profession in the future but it has yet to be seen how much employers will choose to invest apprenticeship levy funds in degree level education.

Recruitment challenges

- Most providers of learning disability nursing courses really struggled to recruit to target this year, despite investing in additional marketing and recruitment efforts.
- The decline in applications is anecdotally associated with a particular fall in applications from mature students with some education providers reporting a clear shift to a younger cohort this year.
- In some universities the fall in applications this year has been so great that it has threatened the viability of the course. Some universities have started to question whether they can continue to offer this provision and faculties are under increasing pressure to recruit enough students to keep courses open.
- Some providers have decided not to take a Spring 2018 intake to help bolster the September 2017 cohort.
- Universities were united in their belief that a poor understanding of learning disability nursing is a major factor in recruitment problems. Few people have heard of this career. The profession has a low profile with very little understanding about the varied roles that learning disability nurses play in the health, education and social care system

Other challenges

- Learning disability nursing faces some additional challenges including the distance students sometimes need to travel for placements.
- An adequate teaching body is essential to sustain and build the workforce of the future but some universities report challenges in recruiting learning disability nursing educators. Universities need to invest in learning disability nursing academics and educators as current staff near retirement.
- Recruitment to learning disability nursing would be easier if there were clearer career pathways for graduates.
- The profile of learning disability nursing needs to be raised within the student body and within the profession to increase understanding of the value added by these nurses.
- Learning disability nurses work in diverse environments across a broad range of providers in the NHS, Local Authorities, Private, Voluntary and Independent Sectors. Further models of collaboration between providers are needed to ensure a collaborative approach to placement experience, to enhance peer engagement, ensure viable CPD for the existing workforce and to drive high standards of care for people with learning disabilities and their families.

Proposals for increasing student numbers

- Roundtable attendees were unanimous in their support for a high-profile national recruitment campaign, including targeting colleges and schools. Universities cannot do this alone and require support from national bodies including HEFCE and Health Education England. The campaign should profile the varied work of learning disability nurses.
- Learning disability nursing must feature prominently in Health Education England's workforce plan, due to be published in December 2017.
- Universities will continue to work closely with Trusts and must build on existing relationships with the voluntary and independent sector, where many learning disability nurses work. STPs and LWABs must ensure that the learning disability workforce features in local workforce plans.
- To ensure national work plans help learning disability nursing the profession requires national champions in senior policy roles, in parliament and across charities.
- An expansion of postgraduate pre-registration programmes in learning disability nurses could help with recruitment into the workforce.
- We need to understand the challenges facing mature students and if necessary invest in schemes to recruit and support these students (this could include targeted financial support)
- The new NMC standards offer opportunities to consider integrated curricula and multi-professional learning.
- Investment in CPD is absolutely essential to maintain and develop workplace based education.

Health Education England, HEFCE and NHS England all identified learning disability nursing as being a high policy priority, particularly as NHS England works towards delivering on its learning disability commitments. Health Education England and NHS England have assembled a task and finish group to look at recruitment problems. Universities are included in this group. HEFCE also promised to consider how it might help this subject.

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