AN ACADEMIC DIRECTOR WRITES

Equipping students for work
Students need to be given real-world experiences to prepare them for life after graduation, says Tracey Proctor-Childs

A new wave of nursing students started this month, embarking on a career in health services that faces increasing financial pressures and ongoing change.

With an ageing population and people living longer, the need for skilled health professionals is more important than ever. And that depends on graduates having the right skills and mindset.

The government has challenged universities to provide 10,000 nurses by expanding available places by 2020. Nurses will need increasingly higher skill levels to manage the population’s needs.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency recently published its annual graduate ‘employability’ figures for the UK. They show 71% are employed in professional occupations within 6 months of graduating. In nursing, the figures rise to 99%.

Extensive training
But this only tells half the story. Universities need to develop flexible, creative, well-rounded graduates who have solid knowledge to apply in practice. We have to provide an environment where they can use their knowledge to help them in a work setting.

Practical experience is crucial. Placements provide a strong base, but students need to have access to the latest equipment and facilities. For example, the University of the West of England (UWE) has state-of-the-art simulation suites for all nursing fields so students will be prepared for the work environment.

Students expect to leave with the fundamental practical and theoretical skills to ‘be a nurse’. However, they also leave with in-depth theoretical and practical knowledge, advanced communication skills, critical thinking, adaptability, and confidence in leading and teaching others. This often reinforces their compassion, and their enjoyment of the job.

Increasingly, it’s not good enough for any graduate to only have knowledge, they have to be able to apply it in different contexts. Universities can’t do this in isolation.

A UWE report The Role of Progressive Universities in the Global Knowledge Economy, last month called on universities to forge closer links with business to bridge the skills gap and increase productivity.

Universities need to focus on learning experiences in the real world that allow graduates to be adaptable, enterprising and ready for work.