The movement of nurse education towards academe has produced lively debate in the professional press. Margaret Miers investigates what images higher education has of nursing.

Temperatures run high over nurse degrees

A spirited response to the perceived inadequacy of student nurses’ preparation in biological sciences and nurse teachers’ knowledge base in relevant disciplines (May 6, March 18, 1994) brought spirited responses in letters from nurse teachers. Nurse educators pointed to their rapid response, to the perceived need to develop academic abilities, their specific preparation as teachers and the responsibility of the ENB to retain professional control over curricula. Nurse educators criticised academic elitism, rigidity and ignorance of nursing (March 3, April 1, April 8, May 27, 1994). But the ignorance can be mutual, as illustrated by a nurse teacher’s suggestion that higher education staff gain lectureships after only a three year degree (May 27, 1994).

Agreements between the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals and the NHS Executive to increase the length of training contracts to a minimum of five years are arrangements whereby the NHS can make some transfer payments to pension schemes to ease the transfer of college staff to ‘old’ universities have been reported (April 4, 1995), indicating that, despite local responsibility for incorporation plans and processes, national agreements have been necessary.

Recently, reports of mergers concentrate on incorporation agreements. The University of Hertfordshire was reported to have arranged the first merger under new regulations through which NHS staff will come under university terms and conditions of service (October 15, 1993). The vice chancellor’s reported delight at welcoming ‘talented and dedicated’ staff was not shared, according to Nursing Standard, by nurse teachers (NS. 1993. 8, 5, 10). Potential problems deriving from yearly assessment of nurse education needs were not noted at the time in The Higher.

Serious consideration of the financial and contractual issues raised by incorporation have only been discussed in The Higher more recently – in an editorial (May 6, 1994) and when Hertfordshire’s loss of some post-registration contracts received a brief mention (May 27, 1994). University difficulties over tendering for education contracts might have led to an emphasis on tensions inherent in the incorporation process. Nevertheless, The Higher’s reporting style might add to or diminish unease. Northumbria’s incorporation of Bede, Newcastle and Northumbria College of Nursing was described as a ‘takeover’ (June 6, 1994). By 1995, ‘merger’ was the favoured term.

Spring 1994 brought frequent reports on tensions between higher and nurse education. Publicity given to Professor Barbara Banks’ concerns about the inadequacy of student nurses’ preparation in biological sciences and nurse teachers’ knowledge base in relevant disciplines (May 6, March 18, 1994) brought spirited responses in letters from nurse teachers. Nurse educators pointed to their rapid response, to the perceived need to develop academic abilities, their specific preparation as teachers and the responsibility of the ENB to retain professional control over curricula. Nurse educators criticised academic elitism, rigidity and ignorance of nursing (March 3, April 1, April 8, May 27, 1994). But the ignorance can be mutual, as illustrated by a nurse teacher’s suggestion that higher education staff gain lectureships after only a three year degree (May 27, 1994).

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Finance has always been a problem. A 1989 report ‘HMI stresses health visitor crisis’ criticised district health authorities for providing insufficient training seconcdments (September 22, 1989), while an earlier report on £150,000 ‘set aside by the government to improve the training of general practice nurses’ quoted Harriet Harman’s view that the sum was ‘totally inadequate’ against the background of cuts in student nurse intakes (April 22, 1994). Working Paper 10 proposals were reported in an account that paid close attention to the possibility of pre-registration undergraduate degree courses being NHS rather than DoE funded (October 20, 1989).

Front page news

Not surprisingly, degrees in nursing receive considerable attention in The Higher. In 1987, a University Grants Committee review of nursing degrees was announced in the light of ‘increasing shortages of nurses as outlined in the Project 2000 report’ (November 27, 1987). Agreement by the Universities Funding Council to fund a further 160 student places on nursing degrees received front page attention in 1989 (August 11, 1989). But uncertainty prevailed. In March 1989, Trevor Clay was reported as noting that plans for student loans could mean that ‘expansion in degree courses in nursing could be strangled at birth’ (March 24, 1989). The halt in the move to develop three year undergraduate degrees (perhaps in expectation of UFC funding) was reported in 1991 (June 21, 1991).

Degree level routes for qualified staff, facilitated through the CATS scheme was heralded in 1989: ‘Birth of CNAA credit will shorten midwives’ labour’ (March 17, 1989) and there have been frequent reports in the 1990s concerning innovative courses for nurses and professions allied to medicine. South Bank’s health studies framework was publicised as a ‘do-health-yourself’ course (April 17, 1992), RCN and Nursing Standard’s collaboration for Nursing Update was reported (September 27, 1991) and nurse practitioner courses at Aberystwyth, Dunedin, and at Buckinghamshire College also gained attention (April 24, January 20, 1990).

It is reports about curriculum debates which expose differences between nurse and higher education. Conflicts over professional or higher education control of the curriculum, fortunately, rarely erupt into ‘how dare they’ ripostes, with higher education claiming ‘they are our qualifications’ (May 6, 1994). Concern over the content of the curriculum and who should teach what, however, is real. Articles in The Higher have, over the years, sensitively addressed the complexity of the issues without arriving at answers. Bowman foresaw the skill mix difficulties of implementing Project 2000 as nurse leaders would wish, predicting the rise of the support worker. He also queried whether higher education staff, with their emphasis on theoretical-academic development, would be adequately prepared for playing a greater role in nurse education (July 17, 1987).

Hillman, writing from his experience with biological sciences in nursing curricula, outlined the difficulty of attempting to introduce a broad range of relevant subjects into nursing curricula. He argues for differently focused (social or biological sciences) nursing degree courses, or for courses with a common core, allowing for greater specialisation in later years. Such specialisation would allow nurses to become more involved in collaborative research on ‘the organisation and administration of nursing, on the efficacy of nursing treatments, and on animal models of human disease’ (April 29, 1988). Revisiting Hillman’s analysis could be time well spent. Barbell, more recently and in relation to Project 2000, focuses on biology to raise issues of entry requirements, of national parity and of progression beyond diploma level qualification (July 17, 1987). Can we be confident that nurse education and higher education colleagues are seriously addressing these issues in the turmoil surrounding incorporation?

Slow progress in research

The Higher reports show that differing perceptions of nurse teachers’ roles in higher education have been aired over many years. In 1988, lecturers in nursing were reported as having difficulty finding time (because of clinical supervision), or funds (because of medical dominance) for research. Nurse lecturers conducting research do so under considerable personal pressure; nursing research fails to develop (May 6, 1988). The limited nature of nursing research was, according to a report by Warwick University’s Nursing Policy Studies Centre (subsequently disbanded) a result of the lack of any systematic approach, dependence on narrow professionalising rather than challenging premises and insularity from other disciplines and researchers (June 2, 1989). Although later reports on research record project contracts awarded through the ENB programme (June 7, July 19, 1991) and the launch, in collaboration with the RCN, of a new policy centre for nursing research (February 24, 1995), overall progress in research development has been slow.

Kate Robinson, at the 1993 Nurse Education Tomorrow conference identified a conflict between the HEFC research assessment exercise (favouring pure research) and the NHS research development strategy (favouring applied) and urged nurses to pursue the aims of the NHS strategy (September 24, 1993). Identifying higher education research as ‘pure’ as opposed to applied has the mythical quality of most stereotypes, but two years later nurses’ involvement in either remains limited.

The current emphasis on nurse teachers’ need to maintain relevant clinical experience will do nothing to relieve the difficulties lecturers in nursing will have finding time for research. Research has traditionally developed alongside teaching in higher education, at different rates in different institutions. The current relationship between research and teaching in higher education is changing and uncertain, but the relationship has been close by tradition and remains deep rooted. It is still difficult to see how nursing research will develop given the lack of overall vision about the nature, level and content of nurse education and the future role of nurse teachers.

Quality assurance

Perhaps some of these issues might be resolved through an emphasis on quality. Again, however, the future quality assurance mechanisms in higher education-based nurse education remain controversial. In 1993, David Jones, then principal of Sheffield and North Trent College of Nursing regretted the fact that nursing would not be included within the HEFC quality assessment exercise, thus showing a confidence in higher education which might have eased the local incorporation process. Although professional educational audit through ENB procedures rather than HEFC ones reduces the risk of unproductive over-assessment, professional courses and staff will remain separate from higher education colleagues’ concerns.

A 1992 report on an HMI review at a higher education college working with a college of nursing illustrated the difficulties of maintaining effective educational provision at a time of rapid change and development (March 13, 1992). However encouraging signs that mergers between nurse education and higher education are changing the perspectives of both universities and nursing can be found in a back page article. An RCN Congress vote urging ministers to address nurse shortages, the lack of increase in student bursaries and the RCN’s support for Higher Education Quality Council involvement in monitoring educational standards all received attention (May 19, 1995). This report alone might indicate that nursing’s place in higher education is secure.

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All dates refer to issues of The Higher, unless otherwise stated.