National curriculum will prove flexible for students

The RCN has backed moves by the government and the UKCC towards a national curriculum for nursing students. Speaking at the RCN association of nursing students annual conference, RCN general secretary Christine Hancock said it was ‘quite illogical’ to maintain different curricula throughout the country. That has to be a nonsense,’ she said.

A national curriculum would give students the flexibility to move from one part of the country to another and help employers know what they were getting when taking on newly qualified staff.

Miss Hancock said the government’s strategy for nursing in England, Making a Difference, and the UKCC Education Commission’s report, Fitness for Practice, ‘came very close’ to recommending such a system.

RCN education adviser Anne Eaton said the education outcomes currently expected by the UKCC were ‘exceedingly broad and open to interpretation’.

She said: ‘What we have got are real anomalies. The mobility of students is hindered and potentially we lose students if they have to move. It must also be of benefit to managers to see that, no matter where their potential nurses come from, they have reached an agreed national standard.

However, attempts to establish a UK-wide curriculum are hampered by the publication of separate nursing strategies for each of the four UK countries.

For example, the strategy published by the Welsh Assembly, Realising the Potential, advocates all-graduate entry into nursing, while Making a Difference, published by Whitehall, does not. Strategies for Scotland and Northern Ireland have yet to be published.

In her address, Miss Hancock praised nursing students for their efforts in rebuffing the ‘bitter attacks on nursing education’ by ministers. She highlighted claims by health secretary Frank Dobson that nurse education had become too focused on academia.

She said: ‘Over the past 12 months, the issue of how nursing students are educated has hit the headlines of the tabloid press, certainly occupied the minds of the chattering classes and got the politicians going.

‘Miss Hancock added: ‘The proposals for nurse education which were outlined in both the government’s nursing strategies and the UKCC Education Commission’s report show how effective our campaign has been.

‘Many of you gave up your time to draw up petitions, to demonstrate, to be interviewed by the media and, most importantly, to patiently and painstakingly put the case for nurse education.’

Know where you are going and plan your own career

Nursing students have a more important role in the NHS before they qualify than they do later in their careers, the conference was told.

David Dawes, chief executive of East Manchester primary care group, told students: ‘Patients see nursing students and care assistants more than anyone else during a hospital stay, for example.

‘You are doing the actual job, the really personal stuff. When you qualify and move up the ladder, you will be less important than you are now and than most other people in health care.’

Mr Dawes also encouraged nursing students at the conference to continue to be ‘activists’ throughout their careers, as positive agents of change.

He said: ‘Whenever you see more than two nurses gathered in a canteen, they will be complaining about something connected with work. But few do anything about it.

‘We need people like you, to notice issues like old people not having their own pyjamas or dentures. You are the ones who can bring about change.’