Flexible pathway into the profession for support staff

Course offers healthcare assistants the opportunity to pursue nurse registration while remaining at work – and with a timetable to suit.

By Nicky Genders

As the shape of the UK nursing workforce changes, partnership working between employers and educational institutions can help recruit and retain staff.

Workforce and funding arrangements vary across the UK. In England, the nursing associate and apprenticeship routes have been introduced, while the bursary for pre-registration nursing and midwifery education is ending.

The bursary is being retained in Wales, but as we do not have access to nursing apprenticeship money and cannot use the nursing associate route, the challenge has been to develop a flexible approach to widening access to pre-registration education. Through a partnership between universities and health boards in Wales, healthcare support workers (HCSWs) can now have pre-registration training over a period of four to six years, while continuing to work.

This approach is linked to the HCSW framework in Wales to provide progression to pre-registration nurse education. The aims, learning outcomes and assessment methods of the nursing degree are the same as the full-time route, but with a change to the schedule and timescales for completing the course.

Combined distance and practice learning enables students to work towards their degree and registration while still being employed by the health board, providing continuity and a ‘home base’.

Benefits include a ‘skills escalator’ approach, in which an HCSW can see a career pathway through to qualified nurse in their employing organisation. This lets employees see the health board is committed to, and invested in, their development.

Continuity of care

For health boards, there are the benefits of building relationships with patients who have long-term conditions because the HCSW stays in employment throughout their pre-registration training.

Initially planned with Cwm Taf University Health Board, we now work with other boards. Three Welsh universities are offering this flexible route, each with an individual approach to the needs of boards and populations.

The value of this enterprise in practice is the legacy of learning it gives to the health board and the flexibility of pathways for the university. For both health boards and the University of South Wales, this partnership sends messages to staff and the public that careers can be sought in the communities where they live.

The first cohort of 30 students will begin their course in September.

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