High hopes for education

A major change is about to take place in the way nursing students in the UK are educated, and this will have far-reaching effects for decades to come. It is the biggest change since the introduction of Project 2000, which saw most students being taught to diploma level in universities rather than as apprentices in hospitals.

Project 2000 was a product of the 1980s and was designed, as its title suggests, to produce nurses fit for the demands of a 21st century health service. Its introduction still divides opinion today, with many older nurses convinced that the previous model, with its greater emphasis on practical skills, produced staff who were better qualified to care for patients.

STUDENTS STARTING COURSES WILL BE THE ONES WHO LEAD THE PROFESSION IN THE FUTURE

The Nursing and Midwifery Council will therefore have been entitled to feel some trepidation when it embarked on its review of nurse education, which has concluded with a new set of standards for the UK’s university nursing faculties. Their introduction, as England finally catches up with Wales and Scotland by preparing all of its students to degree level, only serves to heighten the importance of getting the new curricula right.

Nursing is unusual among academic disciplines in that there are relatively few degree-level courses that lead directly into a single professional role. And students who read for a degree in medicine or law go on to learn the practical skills associated with being a doctor or a lawyer at a later stage.

Nursing students are expected to emerge from their training with an academic qualification – which is tough enough to acquire in itself – and the ability to care holistically for patients in a band 5 post or equivalent role in the independent sector. Preceptorship programmes to help with the transition from placements and classrooms to hospital wards and community settings are still somewhat patchy in their quality and availability.

Large cohorts of students will start training under the new curricula over the next few months. They will soon start appearing on placements, and will doubtless come under greater scrutiny than their predecessors. These students will have received their A-level results last week, with confirmation for some that they have won a place on a course. They will be the nurses who lead the profession through the middle part of this century, and it is in everyone’s interests that the new education system is a success.