Academics are planning a concerted attack on the long-standing costly problem of high attrition rates. Petra Kendall-Raynor reports

Nationwide initiative to reduce student drop-out rates revealed

A new group aims to tackle student attrition by sharing best practice and ideas. The group is being set up by academics at the universities of Keele and Nottingham and is open to other interested parties.

Mark Avis, head of the school of nursing, midwifery and physiotherapy at the University of Nottingham, revealed the plans at a healthcare education conference in Cambridge earlier this month. He said a lot of excellent work is being undertaken to reduce attrition, and that the new group will build a national picture of the issue with the aim of helping higher education institutions disseminate good ideas.

He told Nursing Standard: ‘Universities are striving to develop all their students’ potential. It is in the best interests of everyone for us to put in place processes that will help retain students who will go on to make a valuable contribution to the health service.’

Professor Avis hopes members of the group, who are yet to be named, will have access to an online forum to help them share ideas.

Nursing Standard has tracked attrition from nursing courses across the UK since 2006. Latest figures, published last year, found the average attrition rate was 28 per cent, an increase from 26 per cent in 2008, and 25 per cent in 2006 (see box).

The cost of attrition to the UK taxpayer is estimated to be £108 million a year in lost fees and financial support.

In addition, our research found a wide variation in drop-out rates across different universities, with some retaining more than 90 per cent of students, while others hold on to fewer than half.

A practice learning adviser from a university in the south west told the conference that the biggest challenge was sifting out applicants who will later drop out.

The adviser, who asked not to be named, said: ‘Applicants may agree to anything to get on a course, but it is once they are on the programme that problems emerge.’

‘THIS IS WELCOME AS IT IS OWNED BY THOSE WHO DEAL WITH ATTRITION EVERY DAY’

James Buchan, professor in the faculty of health and social sciences at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, predicted that as student commissions reduce, universities will increasingly focus on reducing drop-out rates.

Professor Buchan told Nursing Standard: ‘There is no doubt that student attrition will become a bigger issue as we move into an increasingly tight funding situation. Commissioners will demand greater certainty that their funding will lead to successful students.’

He added: ‘This initiative is welcome and as it is owned by those who have to deal with attrition on a daily basis, it may have more chance of success.’

Last year financial incentives were introduced for universities achieving low attrition rates. But a Department of Health (DH) spokesperson said it was not monitoring their effectiveness and that it was up to strategic health authorities to do so.

The DH had been considering a ‘national minimum performance indicator’ for attrition, but the plans were dropped because of the large number of factors affecting attrition.

For more information on the group email mark.avis@nottingham.ac.uk

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attrition rates by country</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
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<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>Scotland</td>
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<td>30%</td>
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<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>N. Ireland</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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Source: Nursing Standard