Exclusive: figures obtained by Nursing Standard reveal there will be 4,500 fewer nurses training this year than there were five years ago. Tamsin Snow reports

Experts fear reduction in student places will spark workforce crisis

Around 1,260 fewer nursing students will train in the UK this year compared with last year, figures obtained by Nursing Standard show.

The figures also reveal almost 4,500 fewer nurses will be trained in the UK this year compared with five years ago, prompting concern among experts of a return to ‘boom and bust’ workforce planning.

RCN acting education adviser Gill Robertson says the figures are ‘extremely worrying’. She points out that with most universities moving from diploma to degree courses in England this year, attrition rates could increase further reducing the number of qualified nurses.

‘We have no idea what impact degree-level education will have on attrition,’ she says.

Ms Robertson questions how workforce plans are developed and says the figures ‘fly in the face’ of research that shows high nurse-to-patient ratios lead to lower mortality and morbidity rates.

‘THIS IS FLAWED WORKFORCE PLANNING AND WILL PUT CARE QUALITY AT RISK’

~ Ieuan Ellis

Ieuan Ellis, chair of the Council of Deans of Health, which represents 85 universities that teach nursing and midwifery, warns the cuts will force institutions to review the viability of courses.

‘We are concerned that the significant reduction in nursing commissions is based on delivering short-term financial savings and flawed workforce planning,’ he says. ‘This will put care quality at risk by failing to take account of nursing workforce needs in the medium term. Where nursing courses are closed, the capacity for nurse education and training to meet the workforce needs of the future may be seriously limited. This is the real danger of short-term boom and bust planning approaches.’

Nursing Standard’s survey of ten strategic health authorities (SHAs) in England show that all but one – NHS West Midlands – is reducing the number of nursing students it commissions. The figures show that the largest cutbacks by far are in NHS London, where pre-registration nursing places will drop overall by 449 – or 13 per cent – in 2012/13 compared to 2011/12.

Workforce expert James Buchan, professor in the faculty of health and social sciences at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, says the cuts indicate the scale of the declining number of nurses who will come into the workforce in the next few years.

He says the loss in pre-registration nursing courses in London was of ‘particular concern’.

‘London is the engine of growth for the nursing workforce in the UK, with many nurses training in the capital’s hospitals before moving into post-registration specialist training and jobs elsewhere in the country. By reducing the number of placements, there will be a decline in nurse numbers throughout the UK.’

Boosting specialties

SHA workforce experts and government spokespeople say that the cuts in commissions are based on employers’ plans for fewer nurses. They also cite a reduction in attrition among nursing students as a factor.

An NHS North West spokesperson says ‘over-recruitment’ in some areas has led to there being too many newly qualified nurses. As a result, she explains, training places in adult and mental health have been reduced by more than in learning disabilities and child health.

‘An increased number of post-registration training places are being made available, particularly in health visiting and advanced practice, and we will train more midwives in 2012/13 than in the previous year.’

NHS North East head of workforce intelligence Derek Marshall says the 0.37 per cent reduction in nursing and midwifery

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<td>England</td>
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<td>Scotland</td>
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Reduction in nursing student places over five years

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training places in his region reflects future workforce requirements and is based on discussions with employers.

Meanwhile, developments in health care such as shorter hospital stays and improvements in pharmaceutical treatments have ‘reversed’ the trend for more nurses, according to a spokesperson for the NHS in the east of England and the Midlands.

The spokesperson said: ‘The trend over the previous decade of expanding the NHS workforce has now ended and, as a consequence, commissions have levelled off.

‘All commissions, whether they are an increase or decrease or represent no change, are fully consulted on with service representatives and take into account predicted service requirements for the next few years.’

A spokesperson for NHS South of England, which covers the South West, South Central and South East Coast strategic health authorities, says that the introduction of ‘robust quality reviews’ covering universities has reduced attrition and the number of places being commissioned.

He said: ‘NHS South of England engages with trusts and commissioners in workforce planning and education commissioning.

‘Our approach ensures that the number of places we commission is aligned with the workforce needs of the local NHS to deliver services for patients.’

A spokesperson for NHS London says the number of adult training places has been cut to invest in an increased number of midwifery and children’s nurses.