Another hurdle to overcome?
Will the move to all-graduate entry to nursing make it more difficult for healthcare assistants to join the profession? We asked two experts

Yes, says Louise Johnston, a nurse lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland
Since the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) stipulated that universities should acknowledge students’ prior learning, access to pre-registration courses has been widened. This has allowed a greater diversity of people to enter nursing. Yet the graduate-entry standard could bar healthcare assistants (HCAs) who wish to progress into nursing. Some believe that entry requirements for undergraduate nursing courses are now too high for most HCAs. Generally, entry to a degree-level nursing programme requires five GCSEs at grade C or above and two A levels or equivalent. The intensity of graduate-level study might not appeal to HCAs, who may find the academic content too daunting. In one study, mature students said that the theory part of their nursing course was more difficult than they had expected. The popularity of the graduate route implies increased competition for limited places. Candidates with higher academic qualifications could be favoured.

No, says Chris Sykes, a practice education facilitator at NHS East and Midlands
As long as commissioners continue to support innovative training programmes and invest in improving access to nurse training, the all-degree education system will not prevent HCAs from accessing nursing programmes. Employers are expected to develop their workforce. One aspect of this is widening access for students to whom higher education would normally be denied.

To leave a secure position as an HCA or assistant practitioner to start a nursing degree course represents a significant risk, especially with the prospect of fewer jobs on qualification. The entry requirements for graduate nurse training vary between higher education institutions, therefore these need to be checked in the first instance. HCAs need to have a realistic understanding of what a degree course involves, and they should therefore choose a university that has robust support systems in place. Although the NMC sets entry criteria for pre-registration programmes, other requirements may be set by universities.

One option for gaining the necessary entry qualifications is to take the foundation degree/assistant practitioner (AP) pathway. This is designed for staff at bands 1-4 and often provides enough credits to enter pre-registration programmes.

Some open learning pre-registration nursing programmes, such as that offered by the Open University (OU), have no academic entry requirements other than the NMC criteria. The part-time OU course is available to HCAs who work three days a week and study, often unpaid, for the other two days.

Such open and/or work-based learning is supported by the NMC, which encourages modern approaches to learning.

The NHS Future Forum recommends that trusts should analyse the training needs of their staff and address them accordingly. HCAs and APs should benefit from this.