Pre degree pilot has its uses...and its limitations

Our research, published in this issue of Nursing Standard, shows that more than one in ten of the aspiring nurses on a pilot scheme to give them pre-degree care experience have dropped out.

"SOME OF THOSE LEAVING THE PILOT DECIDED THEY WANTED TO REMAIN AS HCAS"

The pilot is a response to the Francis report into care failings at Stafford Hospital. He recommended a requirement of three months’ experience before a candidate embarked on a nursing degree.

The pilot is promoted as a taster for life as a student, and ultimately a nurse. In this context, a ten per cent bail-out after five months could be a sign of success. Our research found that some of the healthcare assistants (HCAs) decided nursing was not for them; others were homesick. It is much better for people to discover sooner rather than later they are not ready for what can be a challenging career. This may also help reduce expensive university attrition.

However, whether it is feasible to make it compulsory for all students to have front line care experience before starting a nursing degree remains to be seen. It is unclear if a pilot of 165 places can demonstrate how to overcome the logistical nightmare of giving potential nursing students practical experience.

And the pilots vary widely between the participating trusts: some last five months, others a year. The HCAs might work in numerous settings or on a single ward. Some are filling existing posts, others are supernumerary.

The pilot size is too small to analyse the disruption to nurse supervisors and to patient care – of giving large numbers of HCAs the ability to rotate through specialties. Whatever lessons can be learned, any proposed changes must be more widely tested before implementation.

Our research shows that some of those leaving the pilot decided they wanted to remain as HCAs, demonstrating that the role and its responsibilities can be distinct from nursing. It would be unfair if these HCAs were crowded out of their chosen career by people who have chosen to pursue a nursing degree.

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