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trition on nursing degrees is stubbornly high, with one in four (24%) students dropping out of their studies – which is a similar level to last year.

A Nursing Standard investigation, in collaboration with independent charity the Health Foundation, shows that despite political pledges to tackle the issue, students are still dropping out in worrying numbers, and at a time when the NHS needs nurses more than ever.

Nursing students who leave their courses blame finances, academic issues, placement quality, workload and lack of support.

Why students leave early
Nursing students have shared vivid accounts of the pressures that led them to leave university. Grant Byrne recalls that trying to fit in part-time work to support his studies was a factor in his failing his third year of a nursing degree at Glasgow University in 2013.

‘I was working too many hours in my job, which became a real issue for me,’ he says. ‘It was just the wrong point in my life - I had a lot of personal issues and things kept getting in the way of my course, so I failed my last exam.’

Mr Byrne subsequently applied for a place on an adult nursing course at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, where he is about to enter his final year.

‘This time I was more strict about the number of hours I wanted to work alongside university,’ he adds.

‘You learn from your mistakes.’

For University of Southampton mental health nursing student Jess Redway, a period of ill health caused her to suspend her studies, and she is about to begin her second year after a year out.

‘Halfway through my second placement I became quite unwell with mental health issues’

Grant Byrne, nursing student, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

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volume 34 number 9 / September 2019 / 31
and I reached the point when I realised I wasn’t well enough to practise anymore.’

**Drop-out rates matter**

Registered nursing vacancies stand at 40,000 in England alone. Queen’s Nursing Institute chief executive Crystal Oldman says student attrition must be taken into account in the final version of the NHS People Plan, the health service’s strategy on how to recruit and retain staff, due to be published shortly.

“We would like to think that has been considered, because it needs to be part of the narrative around planning,” she says.

In 2015, the Department of Health (DH) told Health Education England (HEE) to halve the student attrition rate. The Reducing Pre-Registration attrition and Improving Retention (RePAIR) project was set up to achieve this.

A report published by the training body last year recommended a standard definition of attrition across all healthcare programmes to aid workforce planning. But a year on, no single accepted definition exists.

HEE regional chief nurse and RePAIR project lead John Clark says work is ‘ongoing’ to agree ‘the most appropriate metrics’ on defining and measuring attrition.

A RePAIR implementation programme is underway and there is a toolkit to help universities reduce attrition.

**Measuring attrition**

Nursing Standard contacted all 81 UK universities offering nursing degree courses.

Using the Freedom of Information Act, we asked them how many nursing students started three-year programmes in 2015, and how many completed in 2018.

Some argue that examining universities’ completion rates on the basis of whether students have completed on time – the method adopted by

**81 universities in the UK now offer nursing degree programmes**

| Source: NMC |

73% of universities with nursing courses responded to Nursing Standard’s request for data

**‘It is critical we focus on improving attrition rates’**

James Buchan, senior visiting fellow, the Health Foundation

Charlotte Hall (pictured below) fulfilled a childhood dream of following her mother and grandmother into nursing when she started a degree in children’s nursing in 2014.

However, she says a combination of financial pressures, bad placement experiences and lack of university support led her to drop out at the end of her first year. At the time, nursing students in England still received a bursary. Ms Hall says her NHS bursary only amounted to £180 per month, which she said did not cover the cost of travel and parking.

On her second placement, she was placed on an acute adult emergency medical unit. She says she felt completely out of her depth.

‘I had no mentor or nurse to work with,’ she recalls. ‘I was given a bay of patients to myself, had to deal with admissions and discharges alone, and then the sister gave me the bleep. I emailed my link lecturer to tell him the whole place was being run by students, I was being trusted with far too much responsibility and it was an unsafe environment for patients.

‘He told me – “don’t worry, you will be a better nurse for it”. It was my first experience of a ward-based environment and I thought, is this what I’ve got to look forward to?’

Ms Hall left her course at the end of the first year. Last November, she began work as a healthcare assistant and now plans to apply for a degree in nursing.

Nursing Standard – is a crude measure of attrition.

The reasoning goes that students who do not complete on time may continue their studies later and so not be captured in this data.

Out of the 81 universities, 59 responded, while two declined to supply data on grounds they believed the information was commercially sensitive.

The fact that attrition rates remain static is worrying, according to nursing workforce expert James Buchan.

‘It is problematic that we continue to have to rely on the use of Freedom of Information requests to get this information into the public domain,’ adds Professor Buchan, a Health Foundation senior visiting fellow and professor in the health and sciences faculty at Queen Margaret University.

‘It is critical we focus on improving attrition rates, yet we continue to have to push those with the information to release it for wider scrutiny.’

**Financial support**

In March, the Closing the Gap report, produced by the Health Foundation, Nuffield Trust and the King’s Fund, said nursing students in England should receive an annual £3,200 grant in addition to the means-tested loans they receive now.

The report said this would help allay the financial worries that put many people off
The overall attrition rate was 24% – the same as 2018.

Breaking down the numbers on nursing student attrition 2015-18

Attrition rates across the UK

The overall attrition rate was 24% – the same as 2018

Attrition rates by sector

Learning disability 27%
Mental health 24%
Adult 24%
Children 24%

Top four reasons for attrition

Financial 32%
Academic 8%
Personal 7%
Placement 6%

Source: Nursing Standard/Health Foundation

Guidance and compassion

‘We need to be able to offer support, guidance, kindness and compassion and, with those numbers, we can achieve that,’ she says.

Staff keep in regular touch with students on placement and carry out placement visits.

‘It doesn’t matter how much you try to prepare students, if it is somebody’s first time going out on the ward and they see something upsetting, it is difficult.

‘For an 18-year-old this can be challenging, but if they know the people to call and have a debrief with, this will stop them feeling uncomfortable about seeing something difficult on wards.’

Perhaps other schools should follow Liverpool’s example – but with so many nurse places to be filled smaller cohorts may also be problematic.

Whatever the solution, given the current staffing crisis of nurses something must be done to reduce attrition and make sure student nurses are ready and able to complete their training.

In 2018, the RCN began its Fund our Future campaign, which calls for £1 billion a year it says has been taken away to be returned to nursing education funding in England.

The college highlighted difficulties faced by nursing students after the bursary was abolished in England in 2017.

RCN general secretary Dame Donna Kinnair (pictured below) says: ‘If we are to attract people on to nursing courses and retain them all the way through to completion, the government must urgently commit to a sustained investment in further education through the provision of proper tuition and maintenance support.’

Responding to our investigation, a Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson highlighted grants were available through the Learning Support Fund to students who are eligible. These annual non-repayable grants include help with placement travel costs, a £1,000 child dependants allowance and up to £3000 exceptional hardship fund.

‘NHS organisations are providing support to newly qualified staff, including developing flexible working and career development opportunities,’ the spokesperson added.

The University of Liverpool’s attrition rate stands at 15% – well below the UK average of 24%.

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