

Education does matter: nursing apprenticeships

Apprenticeships have been in existence across most professional and occupational groups for many years but since 2015, the current English government has planned to introduce a new approach to the management and funding of such apprenticeships from Spring 2017 with the ambition to achieve 100,000 apprenticeships within the NHS by 2020 (DH 2016). The great urgency to develop new apprenticeship models is driven by the government's decision to introduce a levy imposed on all large organisations with a staff bill of £3million or above by 6th April 2017. In April 2017 all large organisations will have a levy imposed of 0.5% of their total staff bill, which will present a significant drain on their resources unless they use them to maximum benefit for their organisation. The levy amount can only be used to pay for the apprenticeship programmes for their staff to develop their current workforce and not to back-fill their role within the organisation. Apprentices must be employed by the organisation and the programme itself must be employer led. It may be delivered by the organisation themselves, or, for Nursing and other professional groups where university preparation is a requirement, delivered in collaboration with a university accredited programme.

In order to meet the criteria for an apprenticeship, the programme of training requires to meet specific criteria as stipulated by the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE) which sets out the minimum requirements to be included in a recognised English framework (DBI&S 2015). Using a work based approach to learning, apprenticeships are offered to hundreds of potential occupations and professions and for nursing, there are three different levels:

1. Nursing Associate apprenticeship.
2. Nursing Degree apprenticeship
3. Higher apprenticeships for those more advanced practitioners wishing to use apprenticeships to support their Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

To date, the Nursing Associate and advanced practice standards are in development but not yet agreed. The Nursing Degree apprenticeship standards have been developed and agreed, with the first wave of apprenticeships due to commence in September 2017. Indeed, the Health Secretary envisages, that once established, there could be up to 1,000 nursing apprentices joining the NHS each year (DH 2016). However, Professor Dame Jessica Corner, chair of the UK Council of Deans of Health, argues that apprenticeships should not be seen as a solution to the crisis in the nursing workforce and advocates that the traditional university training should be the 'absolute priority and focus' (Merrifield 2017). With the new degree apprenticeships likely taking a minimum of 4 years to complete, this approach will not be a 'quick fix' to create an easy solution to the staffing problem.

With the introduction of the student loan system from September 2017 for all applicants to health professional programmes, nursing degree apprenticeships offer NHS staff the opportunity to earn and learn towards achieving Registration and at the same time receive some financial support from the NHS to cover travel costs (DH 2016). For those University

programmes which attract a largely mature student cohort, the apprenticeship approach will become an attractive option for candidates who are risk averse to taking on additional debt.

However, education does matter. With the growing staffing crisis in the nursing workforce against a background of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust inquiry which illustrated the pressure nursing and other health professional staff are under impacting on patient care (Francis 2013), the temptation for NHS Trust to impose work responsibilities on degree apprentices when they are learning will be the challenge that NHS organisations face. Fifty years of striving to achieve graduate entry requirement and supernumerary status for registered nursing programmes will now be challenged by this new nursing degree apprenticeship.

It took a number of years for supernumerary status to really embed into practice for students to achieve a healthy balance between learning and working. Now that new NMC Standards for pre-registration will soon be published to raise the standards expected by the newly qualified nurse, there are grave concerns as to the learning potential for these new degree apprenticeships.

We need to learn from the past. Sound educational development is key to lifelong learning and a move to introducing the new 'earn while you learn' apprenticeships needs to proceed with caution to safeguard the learning potential for the new graduates, equip them to keep abreast of evidence based practice and prepare them to lead quality care in this changing world.

References:

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