

Experiences of nursing associates' transition to the bachelor nursing degree apprenticeship: a qualitative study

An apprenticeship is a structured training program that combines practical, hands-on experience with formal education. It allows individuals to develop specialized skills, obtain professional qualifications, and earn a wage while gaining expertise in a particular industry or trade (Wolter & Ryan, 2011).

In the United Kingdom (UK), apprenticeship follows a work-study model and plays a vital role in staff development. It fosters skill advancement by offering industry-specific training and providing an alternative to traditional education pathways. This model promotes social mobility by creating accessible routes to employment, particularly for disadvantaged groups, while contributing to economic growth by cultivating a skilled workforce that meets industry demands (Carter & Tubbs, 2017). Furthermore, apprenticeships promote lifelong learning and professional development, aligning with government initiatives aimed at improving regional skills and employment opportunities (Carter & Tubbs, 2017). In critical sectors such as healthcare, apprenticeships integrate hands-on experience in clinical settings with academic instruction, ensuring a comprehensive approach to skill development (Baker, 2019).

Two apprenticeship pathways are available in nursing: the Nursing Associate (NA) and the Registered Nursing Degree Apprenticeship (RNDA) (Department of Health and Social Care, 2020). The former is a two-year program designed to prepare individuals for the NA role. This position acts as a bridge between healthcare support workers and Registered Nurses (RNs), providing essential support to RNs and other healthcare professionals in delivering patient care (NHS England, 2018). In contrast, the RNDA allows individuals to earn a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Nursing through a three- to four-year program that integrates on-the-job training with university education. Upon completing either pathway, graduates are eligible to register with

the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the regulatory body for nursing professionals in the UK (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018).

English universities have recently introduced an accelerated RNDA program specifically for NAs, enabling them to qualify as RNs in a shorter timeframe. By leveraging their existing practical experience and foundational knowledge, NAs can complete the BSc nursing course in as little as 18 months (Royal College of Nursing, 2023). This program recognizes their prior learning and clinical experience, providing a more efficient pathway to RN qualification. Many NAs seek career advancement opportunities, and the RNDA provides a clear route for those aiming to develop advanced skills and achieve professional recognition as RNs. This pathway allows them to continue working in their healthcare roles while pursuing further education and training, making it an appealing option for career progression.

The apprenticeship model described above is particularly desirable to NAs, with research showing that many aspire to become RNs in the future (King et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2021). However, limited evidence exists regarding why they choose to advance to RN roles rather than remain in their current positions, as well as the mechanisms needed to support their career progression (Robertson et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2024). Additionally, little is known about the experiences and challenges NAs face while undertaking an accelerated nursing degree apprenticeship.

Given these gaps, this study aimed to explore the motivations driving NAs to pursue a nursing degree and investigate the facilitators and barriers they encounter when transitioning into the RNDA program.

Methods

This study adhered to the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007).

Study design

This exploratory study employed qualitative research methods, including focus group discussions with the apprentices and thematic analysis techniques. An exploratory research design was chosen to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and generate meaningful insights (Swedberg, 2020), aligning closely with the study's objectives. Focus groups, a widely used method in exploratory studies, are particularly effective for collecting data through dynamic group interactions, often yielding richer and more nuanced responses compared to individual interviews (Krueger, 2014). Given these advantages, this selected methodology was considered well-suited for exploring the experiences of NAs as they transition into the RNDA program.

Study setting

This study was conducted at a public university in South West England.

Sampling and recruitment

The accelerated program was launched in March 2024, with the participants forming the first cohort with a total of 10 students. This full-time BSc Nursing program has a completion timeframe of 18 months. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the RNDA participants, with all apprentices in this cohort invited to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria for this study included RNDAs enrolled in the accelerated nursing degree program. The exclusion criteria were other student undertaking the other BSc nursing degree programs.

Seven apprentices agreed to take part in the study, including five from the adult nursing field and two from the mental health field. Two focus groups were conducted, and participants were recruited through announcements posted on their Personal Tutor MS Teams® channel.

Data collection

The focus groups were conducted online using MS Teams® in June 2024 at times convenient for the participants. Two facilitators moderated each group, using a focus group guide sheet (See Supplementary File - Appendix A). Participants were randomly assigned to each group, with the first group consisting of five individuals and the second comprising three, both within the recommended size range for focus groups (Barbour, 2018). Each discussion lasted approximately 90 min and was recorded for analysis. The sessions followed the stages outlined by Ritchie et al. (2013), including introductions and setting ground rules, the main discussion, and a concluding debrief.

Data analysis

All members of the research team participated in the analysis process. The focus groups were conducted sequentially, with preliminary analysis undertaken between the two sessions. Data were analyzed thematically following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The analysis began with transcription and anonymization of all data, replacing participants' names with identifiers (e.g., P1). Each transcript was then imported into Excel® for systematic analysis. Team members carefully reviewed the transcripts multiple times for a comprehensive understanding of the data. During initial coding, relevant data segments were identified across all transcripts, and meaningful text units were assigned to codes. This process was iterative, involving multiple rounds of comparison and refinement. The team then grouped related codes into overarching themes and subthemes based on recurring patterns. Regular meetings were held throughout the process to ensure consensus among the research team.

Rigour and trustworthiness

This study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research. Credibility was established through the collection of focus group notes, reflective discussions, and transcript analysis. Regular peer debriefings and an ongoing reflexive process helped maintain consistency between the data and its interpretation. To enhance transferability, the study setting, data collection, and analysis were described in detail within the methods section. Dependability was strengthened by researchers independently organizing, coding, and subcategorizing the data in a systematic manner. To improve confirmability and minimize researcher bias, the focus group questions were developed in consultation with two university professors involved in this program's development and non-academic members of the apprenticeship team. Additionally, one researcher reviewed the data to identify any missing statements and conducted a process of reduction, refinement, and condensation. Each researcher then independently coded the data, established subcategories, and categorized the findings. Multiple meetings were held to reach a consensus between the two researchers.

Ethical considerations

This study received ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee (ethics ID 56225). The primary investigator provided participants with an invitation letter, a brief explanation of the study objectives, and consent forms. **Participants were informed that the focus group was recorded and informed consent was obtained.** Participants were also informed of their right to participate voluntarily and to withdraw at any point before data anonymization. All focus group responses were kept confidential, with data accessible only to the research team.

Results

The seven students participating in the study were enrolled in an 18-month accelerated apprenticeship program. They were all mature students with less than five years of experience as NAs. Their work history spanned various practice areas, including mental health, hospital, and community settings. Following thematic analysis, four overarching themes were identified (Table 1).

Table 1

Key themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Overarching aspiration for professional and personal growth	Increased responsibility Personal fulfilment and challenge Passion for nursing and patient care
Support systems and structured transitions facilitating the program	Academic and structural support Peer support Consistent and multi-layered support from employers
Navigating multifaceted barriers in the transition to full-time nursing education	Challenges in academic discipline and system navigation Adjustment struggles and uncertainty in transition

Themes

Theme (1). Overarching aspiration for professional and personal growth

This theme captures participants’ ambitions to grow professionally and personally, with three emerging sub-themes.

Sub-theme (1). Increased responsibility

Many participants expressed a strong desire to advance from their current roles to more advanced nursing roles. Career progression was seen as essential to achieving professional goals and gaining recognition. They emphasized the importance of expanding their knowledge, skills, and competencies:

To develop and further my training, gaining more knowledge to be better at my job (P6). I have got a lot more room for progression as a Nurse (P7).

Participants were motivated by the prospect of greater responsibility, a broader scope of practice, and opportunities to perform more complex clinical tasks. Many felt constrained by their current roles as NA, noting employers' lack of recognition and understanding.

As an NA, there is only so much you can do ... missing the most important part, which I think is the planning, the care, and doing the proper assessment (P2). When you look at other job opportunities as an NA, there is no career progression opportunity, which is a shame (P7). I know that the NA role has been around for some time, but within the trust that we work in, it is almost like every time you go to do something, they are like, oh, are you allowed to do that? You know? (P5).

Sub-theme (2). Personal fulfilment and challenge

For some, pursuing a nursing degree is a personal challenge driven by a need for self-validation and resilience.

For me, it is not only achieving the qualification but also a personal challenge ... you know that dream was not out of reach (P3).

Sub-theme (3). Passion for nursing and patient care

A deep passion for nursing and a lifelong aspiration to become a nurse fuelled the pursuit of further education for many participants.

I had always wanted to be a nurse, but life has not allowed me that opportunity, and now I am getting it (P5).

Theme (2). Support systems and structured transitions facilitating the program

This theme explores the key facilitators identified by the participants.

Sub-theme (1). Academic and structural support

Participants identified academics and supporting teams as crucial facilitators of the program by providing ongoing support and guidance.

I think the apprenticeship team has also been quite good facilitators (P1). It is sort of obviously been emailing my personal tutor and then being able to point us at people who might know the answer to the question or have answered it themselves (P4).

The program's full-time commitments helped students manage their time effectively and reduced uncertainties.

I think coming in on the first day, and you are going to be a full-time student ...because I went in it thinking it would be like the NA program (P2). Finding out that it is full-time. That was very good. You can concentrate and do your studies (P4). It has been quite good at taking a step back...and being able to learn more (P6).

Participants found that a blended approach, along with various resources, was essential for addressing their specific academic questions and needs.

I have also emailed the librarian a couple of times, and she answered back really quickly. I think the lessons are quite well structured; you are not spoon-fed, but they lay it out for you to make it clear in the lessons (P1). I booked myself a maths session, which I found really useful (P2). I have used the library resources and chatted with some of the staff. Yeah, very helpful (P3). I quite like how it is blended with online and then face-to-face... it is a lot more flexible with childcare. I had to say that the induction period was very helpful (P4). I think the 2 weeks into induction were fantastic (P6).

Sub-theme (2). Peer support

Establishing peer support networks was essential in helping apprentices navigate initial challenges, share information, and access informal support.

I like that we have the clinical skills together to touch base with each other (P2). Whatever you do not know, you can ask any of your colleagues. We organize this group WhatsApp to ask questions (P3).

Sub-Theme (3). Consistent and multi-layered support from employers

Managers played a pivotal role in supporting apprentices by maintaining regular communication, providing encouragement, and addressing course and work balance concerns.

I have had good support. I have had real encouragement from my line managers, which really pushed me to do this (P4). My manager is very supportive. I am able to go to her and catch up with her regularly to discuss how the course is going, how I am getting on, and any worries that I have (P7).

The educational teams and apprenticeship coordinators from the students' organizations offered support, structured training, resources, and regular updates.

I think the practice education and apprenticeship teams are very good (P1). I have been keeping in contact with my home base quite regularly anyway... I certainly feel well-supported by my employer. They encouraged me and pushed me to do this work (P2). The learning development team has been really good. They are quite responsive (P3). The practice educators are very accessible. They came in last week to see us and are quick to help us resolve any issues (P5).

Theme (3). Navigating multifaceted barriers in the transition to full-time nursing education

Participants encountered multiple challenges in transitioning to full-time nursing education.

Sub-Theme (1). Challenges in academic discipline and system navigation

A primary difficulty was maintaining academic discipline and navigating university systems, while some participants found academic tasks like referencing particularly demanding.

My challenge is trying to apply that self-discipline because there are all sorts of distractions (P6). Try to understand this university referencing... it is quite easy just to get distracted (P3). I am struggling with so many different systems that we have to log into. (P5).

Sub-theme (2). Adjustment struggles and uncertainty in transition

Transitioning from work to full-time study created a sense of isolation. Additionally, uncertainty about the program's structure led to anxiety, with students initially unsure of what was expected of them.

When you have been in a place for quite a while, it is quite difficult when you suddenly... get cut off as if you do not exist anymore (P5). We did not know how the course would be and whether or not we would be doing like our nursing associate (P7).

Program intensity also posed a challenge; however, some participants found prior experience helpful.

I am finding the pharmacology mildly challenging (P6). Personally, I am finding the program really intense (P3).

Mature students found it challenging due to distractions from younger classmates.

I find learning in the classroom very difficult with them (P1). Because we are more mature (P5). It is quite hard to focus (P7).

Discussion

This study explored the motivations driving NAs to pursue a nursing degree apprenticeship and examined the facilitators and barriers they encounter when transitioning into an RNDA program. This knowledge is essential for future research and the development of effective implementation strategies to enhance workforce sustainability.

Regarding aspirations for career progression, the findings suggest that NAs view the RN role as essential for their professional advancement, aspiring to expand their competencies and gain greater recognition. This result aligns with existing literature emphasizing the significance of professional development in nursing (Mlambo et al., 2021) and the role of structured career pathways in motivating healthcare professionals and improving job satisfaction (Ahn et al., 2023). From the perspectives of the apprentices, the drive to transition into RN roles is influenced by a combination of intrinsic motivation and perceived limitations in their current roles. Although the NA was designed to bridge the gap between healthcare support workers and RNs, previous research has identified a restricted scope of practice, limited opportunities for advancement, and a lack of recognition and understanding of the NA role and its responsibilities (Khan et al., 2024; Spring et al., 2024).

This study revealed the crucial role of support systems in facilitating NAs' career progression and easing their transition into the RNDA program. These support mechanisms can range from academic support and pastoral care to student-led peer networks. These findings indicate that similar support structures are essential for all entrants into nursing (Edge & Gladstone, 2022). Flexible teaching and learning options, including a mix of online and offline activities, were particularly valued, aligning with evidence suggesting that a blended approach enhances nursing student learning and satisfaction (Du et al., 2022).

Employer support was also vital in this type of work-study program, where line managers, educational teams, and apprenticeship coordinators played essential roles during the transition period, with their regular communication and encouragement boosting participants' confidence. This finding aligns with research findings indicating that organizational backing fosters resilience among transitioning healthcare professionals (Cushen-Brewster et al., 2022). These results further highlight the value of integrated employer-university partnerships (Theobald et al., 2023; Quew-Jones, 2023).

Despite these supportive frameworks, participants encountered several challenges, including maintaining work-study balance, managing academic demands, navigating the social dynamics of returning to education, and adjusting to an age-diverse learning environment. These challenges mirror those experienced by individuals transitioning from college or school to university (Worsley et al., 2021) as well as by BSc undergraduate nursing students (Prymachuk et al., 2019; Gause et al., 2024). These findings underscore the need for tailored support mechanisms to facilitate smoother transitions and promote both academic and social integration.

Strengths and Limitations

This research has several strengths. First, it provides an in-depth examination of participants' perspectives on the accelerated nursing program, making it one of the few studies in the UK to address this topic. Second, it offers valuable insights into the experience of the NAs within the existing workforce and the potential pathways for nursing education. However, it has some limitations. The small, single-university sample limits the transferability of the findings. Conducting focus groups via MS Teams® may have restricted the ability to capture non-verbal cues and build in-person rapport, potentially affecting the depth of responses. To mitigate this, verbal probes were encouraged. Additionally, group dynamics, such as dominant

voices or social desirability bias, may have influenced responses. To address this, a neutral facilitator emphasized individual perspectives and actively encouraged quieter participants to contribute.

Practical Implications for Nursing

To support NAs in their transition to university, our findings emphasize the importance of managing expectations and providing targeted support. While this recommendation applies to all nursing students, our study suggests that for RNDAs, support should be tailored to their individual needs and the unique characteristics of their work-study programs. Additionally, leveraging their resourcefulness can enhance the overall transition experience. Nursing departments must recognize that this transition is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. It requires collaboration among apprentices, employers, and university staff, as well as alignment of expectations and support across academic, social, and personal dimensions. Moreover, expanding this research to other contexts could allow further exploration of the supporting strategies for nursing career development.

Maintaining funding mechanisms for RN training transitioning is also crucial to ensure the healthcare system benefits from a skilled nursing workforce eager to advance their careers.

Conclusion

The transition from NA to RNDA offers significant professional development opportunities driven by aspirations for career growth. However, this academic journey also presents challenges, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address barriers, such as establishing robust academic support systems and fostering strong peer networks.

With the increasing demand for skilled nursing professionals, fostering smooth transitions will be essential to retaining apprentices and reducing gaps, thereby sustaining a competent and motivated healthcare workforce.

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