

# Learning on the job

Apprenticeships are becoming an important route in to nursing, as Erin Dean reports

When she was at school Nicola Harker never dreamt of becoming a nurse or going to university. It was only when she was given the opportunity to work as an apprentice at her local hospital that she realised she wanted a career in nursing.

The apprenticeships she undertook at South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust – first as a clerical officer, then as a healthcare assistant (HCA) – provided the qualifications that Ms Harker needed to gain entry to university. She is now in the second year of a nursing diploma course at Teesside University.

‘I thought I would always be an administrative assistant so I never thought about going to university – it wasn’t something that my family did,’ she says.

Her nursing colleagues speak glowingly of her progress and the dedicated way that she applies what she learns to her work as a bank HCA.

Ms Harker is delighted to have found her niche. ‘I really love the placements,’ she says. ‘The academic work is a little bit more difficult, but there is a lot of support from the university.’

Ms Harker is one of a growing number of apprentices in the NHS. Between 2008 and 2010, new apprenticeships in England rose from 1,300 a year to more than 8,100. In the past year there were 9,000 new posts covering 100 NHS roles, including

pathology technicians, chefs, cleaners, HCAs and maternity support workers.

Chancellor George Osborne announced £180 million funding for a further 50,000 apprenticeships in the 2011 budget. In February, deputy prime minister Nick Clegg said that apprenticeships needed to be ‘right at the heart of how we educate and train people. It is high time we broke down the outdated divide between the academic and the vocational.’

Through a scheme that started in April, nurses can help to raise young people’s awareness of NHS apprenticeships. The Inspiring the Future project, run by the charity Education and Employers Taskforce and backed by unions, is seeking 100,000

## Health service apprenticeships

- ▶ Apprenticeships are work-based training designed around the needs of employers. They lead to nationally recognised qualifications.
- ▶ There are different levels according to the qualifications of the individual. Schemes are open to new and existing employees.
- ▶ Frameworks for clinical apprenticeships are provided by Skills for Health, the organisation that sets training programmes for the UK health workforce.
- ▶ Existing staff fill 75 per cent of NHS apprenticeships. People aged over 25 fill 65 per cent of places.
- ▶ Apprentices will be able to apply for nursing degree courses. Some universities may require additional qualifications.



employees from all sectors to give short careers talks in schools. Potential volunteers can register their interest on the website.

Education and Employers Taskforce director Nick Chambers hopes the talks will inspire state school children: ‘At independent schools, children often hear talks by a wide range of professionals. We want to make sure that children in state schools have these opportunities too.’

He emphasises that broadening access does not mean reducing the quality of the workforce.

‘We are trying to get the right people with the right skills matched to the right job – that is going to be better for the NHS.’

A 2008 study by researchers at the University of Warwick looked at the business case for apprentices in six sectors, which did not include health. It



*Nursing student Nicola Harker (right) with her line manager Sue Scott*

found that the investment made by businesses to train a new employee is generally recouped within two or three years. Apprentices tend to stay longer with their employer and have skills that are often not available elsewhere in the workforce.

But with rising unemployment and increasing competition for jobs, do employers need to invest in apprenticeships?

NHS Employers director Dean Royles says that recruiting people with the right skills for the NHS workforce of the future remains a challenge. He adds

## SUMMARY

Despite the harsh economic climate, the government and NHS employers are continuing to invest in apprenticeships. The schemes are credited with keeping access to nursing careers open at time when the profession is moving to all-graduate entry.

### Author

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that health service employers recognise that apprenticeships are good for the physical and mental health of local communities.

'I am proud that, despite the financial challenges for the NHS, employers are still recruiting

## 'This is a wonderful way of getting nationally recognised qualifications'

people to apprenticeship programmes. They are also looking to recruit those with learning disabilities and young people who may be the first person in their family for a generation who has worked.'

Apprenticeships give staff on Agenda for Change bands 1 to 4 opportunities to gain training, an education and job satisfaction, Mr Royles adds. They also support the growth of relatively new band 4 posts such as assistant practitioners,

providing a greater range of skills within organisations.

RCN healthcare assistant adviser Tanis Hand says that apprenticeships are 'a wonderful way of getting nationally recognised qualifications'.

It is important to ensure there are multiple routes into the profession, especially at a time when all students are being prepared to degree level, she says.

### Representative workforce

James Buchan, professor of health sciences at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, agrees that apprenticeships are particularly important in a graduate-only era.

'In terms of broadening access into nursing, we need to ensure the entry gate stays wide if the profession is to reflect the population it cares for.'

Workforce planning in England is to become the remit of new local employee education and training networks. Healthcare unions intend to keep a close eye on these networks to ensure that sufficient numbers of apprentices are commissioned in the future.

Without the apprenticeship route nurses like Daniel Palmer, a staff nurse at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, might never have found a way into the profession.

Mr Palmer had wanted to study nursing after his A levels, but the lack of a maths GCSE proved a problem. He spent his early twenties working as an HCA before embarking on the apprenticeship that allowed him to study for an advanced diploma in nursing at Teesside University.

'At first I didn't think about an apprenticeship because I thought they were for school leavers,' he says. 'But without it I would not have been able to study nursing at university. I am really grateful for the apprenticeship, and all the work was worth it now that I am a nurse.' **NS**

Find out more about Inspiring the Future at <http://www.inspiringthefuture.org>