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How is the Cost of Living impacting the recruitment and retention of healthcare students with widening participation characteristics

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Meeting the staffing demands of the future UK healthcare workforce has been a source of some concern with government agencies and higher education tasked with addressing the challenge. Palmer, Rolewicz & Dodsworth (2023) in a Nuffield Trust report cite the 'leakiness of the domestic training pipeline' drawing on data which preceded the Covid-19 pandemic and while the Covid years produced a 'bounce' in healthcare pre-registration programme applications, more recent University and College Admission Service (UCAS) data presents a less optimistic picture. There has been a drive to increase the diversity in the demographic of healthcare professionals to more closely resemble the patient populations that they support. This paper explores focus group data gathered from university healthcare educators on the equality and cost of living issues impacting the recruitment and retention of students. The insights of healthcare student leaders on factors impacting retention and a diverse workforce are also considered.

Full paper

A diverse nursing, midwifery and allied health profession (NMAHP) workforce has long been an ambition of healthcare stakeholders. While UCAS and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data can provide useful insights, they do not provide the granularity of recruitment and retention by widening participation characteristic that this project sought to explore. Recruitment trends have been variable to degree programmes across the NMAHP disciplines since the Covid-19 pandemic and UK media headlines have been dominated by perceptions that the National Health Service is 'broken'. The project set out to discover if the post-Covid economic downturn (cost of living crisis) was being equally experienced by healthcare students.

Methodology

Initially, and subsequent to ethics approval, a recruitment and retention survey was circulated to all of the university providers that form the UK Council of Deans of Health (n=102). The survey asked for data to be reported by demographic characteristic of their student populations. However, a low response rate and questions to the research team indicated that not all healthcare faculties could readily access this data and therefore a different research approach was required.

Amended ethics approval resulted in focus groups being conducted with healthcare educators, and then subsequently NMAHP student leaders. Twenty-nine educators drawn from all 4 UK nations and the breadth of the NMAHP disciplines participated in two focus groups conducted in May 2024. Within the focus groups they were asked how the demographic of their student population had changed over the last 5 years, what students had cited as the predominant reasons for withdrawing from their programme in the last 2 years and any demographic trends in those not being retained, and what one intervention would have the most impact on recruitment and retention.

Results

In terms of recruitment, one participant described the '*Covid bounce, now a flop*' reflecting the downturn in applications that many of the NMAHP disciplines were experiencing. However, more positively subjects did reflect there were increasing enrolments with widening participation characteristics.

Finance, mental wellbeing and childcare were the 3 most predominant reasons for student withdrawal. Participants reported students saying that there '*were better ways to earn a living*', that 'c*onditions on placement were not what they expected*' and that '*many students disclose over time that they have had some significant adversity*'. Costs of childcare, clothing for placement, and transport costs were not being equally experienced across their cohorts, or even across the professional groups because of different funding models.

Reviewing the funding, alongside the practice learning hours were perceived as interventions that could reverse the recruitment and retention challenges. The image of the professions and the NHS culture were also cited as areas to address with one participant reflecting that a student had noted that '*the NHS has lost its kindness*'.

Fifty Council of Deans #150 Leaders participants took part in the student focus groups in September 2024. Their questions explored student withdrawal, and interventions to address recruitment and retention challenges. Four thematic areas were identified as impacting student retention: - Financial pressures, Caring commitments, Expectations of the profession, placement and flexibility.

International students were viewed as a group who experienced specific financial challenges, as were mature students with childcare responsibilities. The inability to do part-time work alongside placements was cited as adding to the financial pressures as was the delay in recouping expenses. It was felt that the demands of the programme were not always made clear pre-enrolment and students noted that some of their peers were '*getting burnout before completing their degree*'.

In terms of interventions that would make a difference the students felt that there could be more support within the universities, that more work needs to be done on the imagery of the professions through positive stories, and that there could be more financial incentives e.g. paid placements.

Conclusion

While the findings indicate that some progress has been made in the diversity of healthcare student enrolments, there are specific retention challenges for international students, mature students with care-giving responsibilities and for those with additional support needs. This evidence base has given a platform for those within the Council of Deans of Health network to request a review of the funding models, student support, practice hours, and accessibility of and culture within placements, alongside making a case for positive but realistic depictions of what it means to be a future healthcare professional.