

## HE and the Future Health and Care Workforce: Developing Sustainable Career Ecosystems for Nursing and Social Work Students

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### Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

### Abstract

Global workforce shortages are prompting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to re-examine their role in supporting sustainable career development, particularly within health and social care. In the UK, despite policy efforts to expand education pipelines, many trained graduates do not enter or remain in NHS careers. This study explores the career pathways, motivations, and support experiences of nursing and social work students, drawing on Sustainable Career Ecosystems (SCE) theory to understand how personal, institutional, and systemic factors shape career decisions. Using a mixed-methods design—including stakeholder and student interviews (n=29), and secondary data analysis—findings reveal wide-ranging influences on career orientation, including public perceptions, financial and mental health pressures, and placement experiences. Students prioritise work-life balance, variety, and personal fulfilment. Emerging influences such as peer networks, media, and global markets underscore the complexity of the career ecosystem. Implications for HEIs, policy, and future research are discussed.

### Full paper

Global skill shortages and evolving job markets are prompting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to re-evaluate their role in skills development to better support organisational and societal demands (Laczik and Patel, 2023). In the UK, the strategic importance of HE in shaping the future health and social care workforce has come into sharper focus (UUK, 2023), in light of global concerns about workforce shortfalls driven by demographic changes, high turnover and growing demand (ILO, 2019; WHO, 2024). Universities are therefore central to addressing workforce pressures and fulfilling the aims of the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (NHS, 2023; UUK, 2023).

While policy and institutional responses have prioritised expanding health education capacity and improving retention during training (Williams and Roberts, 2023; Wray et al., 2013), recent evidence highlights a critical gap: the underutilisation of trained graduates within the NHS, with a growing number opting for careers elsewhere (Palmer et al., 2023). This signals the need to look beyond pipeline expansion and consider how sustainable, meaningful, and supported career development can be fostered throughout and beyond HE.

Existing literature focuses on four key themes: career preferences and decision-making, efforts to attract graduates to underserved areas and specialisms, the experiences of under-represented groups, and the emergence of alternative career routes. Most research focuses on nursing students, especially from Australia, with less research in social work or UK contexts. Across both groups, initial motivations are often shaped by perceived 'vocation to care', but students' career orientations shift significantly due to lived experience and practice placements (Avraham et al., 2023; Wareing et al., 2024).

Despite the breadth of available research, it predominantly focuses on early career transitions, with limited attention to how career preferences evolve throughout the HE experience or how support systems interact with students' identities and long-term goals. This study addresses these gaps by exploring career pathways, motivations and support experiences of nursing and social work students in UK higher education.

We apply Sustainable Career Ecosystems (SCE) theory (Donald et al., 2024), which highlights how career trajectories are co-constructed over time through dynamic interactions between personal agency, institutional structures, and labour market conditions (Donald, 2023). This enables a holistic understanding of how HE programmes, placement environments, peer and mentor networks, and broader socio-economic conditions influence career decision-making. The SCE framework allows for an examination of how personal, institutional and systemic factors interact to shape career decisions of nursing and social work students. This approach also places emphasis on worker well-being as a key dimension of sustainable career ecosystems—which is especially salient in high-stress, high-turnover sectors such as health and social care.

An exploratory, mixed methods research design was chosen, comprising semi-structured interviews with strategic stakeholders and students ( $n=29$ ), and secondary data analysis (graduate outcomes & career readiness surveys). Primary fieldwork was undertaken from August 2024 to February 2025. Interviews were semi-structured and audio-recorded with written consent. Qualitative data was analysed thematically and secondary quantitative data was statistically analysed using Excel and SPSS software.

Wide-ranging influences on career motivations and decision-making emerge, as individuals navigate their way through a multi-layered, complex 'ecosystem'. Participants emphasised the importance of public perceptions, past experience and the wider working environment.

Implications of individual, financial and mental health pressures for student experience and academic success were also highlighted. Discussions of the 'ideal job' generated consistent priorities related to variety, work-life balance, client/patient interaction and lifelong learning. Building on early SCE conceptualisation, additional actors and contexts emerged as important influences in the health and social care setting. These included clinical mentors and peers, trade unions, the media and global labour markets.

A future research agenda includes evaluation of alternative/innovative placement approaches, longitudinal research into career journeys (particularly for non-traditional students and new roles/pathways), and system-level attempts to better understand the interconnectivity between higher, further and secondary education systems. Additional perspectives including other student groups, placement mentors, trade unions and professional bodies could provide valuable further insights.