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Introduction

At a time when healthcare providers in the UK are coming under increasing pressure from growing demands, budget constraints and an ageing population, it is crucial that there are enough nurses to enable them to continue to provide excellent and efficient patient care.

While steps have been taken to increase the number of nurses being trained and to develop a sustainable pipeline of talent, there are a number of barriers that prevent people in the UK from training to become registered nurses.

The Open University’s Breaking Barriers to Nursing report investigates the issues and concerns deterring young people from pursuing a career as a registered nurse and the barriers that see many of those who enter degree programmes, whether young or more mature, dropping out.

This report considers a number of solutions that higher education providers and NHS employers could consider in order to improve recruitment and retention within the nursing profession. This in turn can help address the considerable shortfalls in nursing numbers that are predicted to afflict the future provision of healthcare services across the UK.
Foreword

The UK needs more nurses; this is a simple fact. Despite the number of nurses on the register increasing by 20,000 over the past five years, there are still 11,000 vacancies for full-time nurses in the NHS in England – and while healthcare providers are understaffed, patient care is at risk.

Uncertainty around nurses’ right to remain post-Brexit has seen new registrations from the EU fall from more than 10,000 in 2015/16 to just 800 in the year 2017/18, so it is essential we look to cultivate a more sustainable pipeline of nursing talent both within the UK itself as well as from wider sources of international recruitment.

Important steps have been taken to increase the number of places available to study nursing over the past five years. But now, research in this report reveals that 6 per cent of those places went unfilled in the current academic year - the equivalent of 1,450 nurses who could have been fully trained and ready to support the NHS within three or four years.

Three in 10 young people considered studying to become a registered nurse - so it is clear that there must be significant barriers acting to deter many from doing so. Removing these barriers, or helping people to overcome them, could encourage more people to enter the profession and have a significant positive impact on the NHS.

With the introduction of student loans to replace bursaries for nursing study in England, cost is undoubtedly a major disincentive to many, particularly mature students. But there are also a number of other important issues to consider: travel, entry requirements, workload, and even the advice made available at school or college – and there are a number of potential solutions to these that higher education providers and NHS employers could consider in order to improve both recruitment and retention in the sector.

Sally Boyle
Head of School, Faculty of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care, The Open University

As a result of these barriers, many people who may be passionate about entering the profession are unable to study to become nurses, which is adding to the current crisis. It is time to reconsider the traditional idea of a 'one size fits all' approach to nurse education, which lacks the modern flexibility required by many of those interested in pursuing a career in the profession, and ultimately limits widening participation by reducing access to learning.

It is important that we give people more options as to how, when and where they study - so that everyone who has the aptitude and values to become a registered nurse has the opportunity to do so. Currently most Higher Education Institutions have entry requirements that go beyond the minimum criteria set out by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). These requirements restrict access for many who want to join the profession but who may not have received good educational opportunities in the past. At The Open University, we use a robust open selection process, adhering to requirements specified by the NMC, which means we’re able to offer places to a more diverse range of students.
With apprenticeships in England, we are starting to open up new routes into the profession, which can help to widen participation and offer continuous professional development opportunities to support staff who aspire to become registered nurses. Enabling students to earn while they learn, apprenticeships can also remove financial barriers, appealing to those concerned by the cost of study or those who would prefer to go straight into the workforce without a three or four-year hiatus for study.

Similarly, by embracing new technology we can deliver more flexible learning methods. Technology-enabled learning, such as that already offered by The Open University, can remove barriers for many people who would prefer to remain in their home area to study or who are juggling other commitments. If more providers offered this, it would not only encourage more people to study nursing, it would also reduce the number of nurses who relocate back home after qualification.

The collapse in interest from within EU countries in coming to the UK to work as a registered nurse has shown that we must act now to further remove the barriers reducing our access to home grown talent. At a time when the NHS is facing a nursing supply and demand problem, it is unacceptable that places remain unfilled or that so many of those studying feel unable to continue, when relatively straightforward solutions could help.

Sally Boyle
Head of School, Faculty of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care, The Open University
Many are being deterred from entering the nursing profession and vital training places are going unfilled

- 6 per cent of places on offer to study nursing degrees were unfilled at the start of the 2018/19 academic year
  - If filled, these places could generate an additional 1,446 UK nurses each year
- Three in 10 (30%) of young people considered becoming a registered nurse but ultimately opted against it

Money, perceived working hours and pressure, and travel are the most prevalent barriers

- A third of respondents (33%) said that money was a factor in their decision, with many concerned about the cost of study, paying off their student loan or the cost of travelling to lectures or living away from home
- Overall, a quarter (24%) had concerns about the length or flexibility of working hours once qualified – many of these had been influenced by negative stories in the media or online
- The same proportion (24%) were worried about the pressure and stress they might face in the job
- Travelling to university or living away from home impacted 13 per cent of those considering pursuing a career in nursing
- One in 10 (10%) were excluded from studying as a result of entry requirements imposed by Higher Education Institutions
  - 91% of universities require 96 UCAS points or above for entry – the equivalent of 3 English A-levels above a C-grade

Half of current nursing students had doubts before starting their course, but these were quickly mitigated

- Two in five (41%) were reassured after finding out about the support available from the NHS
- More than a quarter (27%) were encouraged by their lecturer or someone else working in the professional
- More than a third (37%) believe that their passion for the profession helped them to overcome challenges
- Three in 10 (28%) found that opportunities for continuous professional development overrode their doubts

More than 6,500 potential nurses drop out from each annual intake

- On average a quarter (24%) of those who begin studying do not complete the course
- One in three (32%) of those currently studying are no longer sure they wish to become a registered nurse
- Travel was the most significant issue, followed by money and workload

Some issues affecting recruitment also have an impact on retention after registration

- Three in 10 (29%) of those currently studying are planning to move to another healthcare employer or region as soon as they are fully qualified
  - A quarter (23%) are planning to move to a healthcare employer closer to their home area
- The drive to secure better salary, benefits and access to continuous professional development will see nearly a quarter (23%) move between healthcare employers

Having identified and investigated the barriers impacting entry to the nursing profession, The Open University offers some potential solutions for Higher Education Institutions and NHS employers to consider:

- Embrace more technology-enabled learning
- Open up access to the profession
  - Remove unnecessary entry requirements
  - Widen participation by introducing new routes
- Promote flexibility and positive nursing stories
- Give nurses the chance to earn while they learn
  - Take advantage of opportunities delivered by new apprenticeships in England
Nursing numbers

The number of nurses in the UK is steadily increasing, but there are still more than 11,000 vacancies for full-time nurses in England alone. For years, Health Education England has been increasing nurse training places in order to meet the needs of NHS England, so that it can continue to provide a safe service to the millions of people who use it each year.

Despite this increase in training places available, new data secured by The Open University from other Higher Education Institutions, under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, reveals that 6 per cent of the places on offer were not filled at the start of the 2018/19 academic year – the equivalent of an estimated 1,446 would-be nurses each year.

With a deficit of 108,000 nurses forecast for 10 years, ensuring that all places on offer to study nursing are filled each academic year is crucial – and could go some way to plugging the gap. If all places are filled each year, then in 10 years an additional 10,122 nurses could be fully qualified, with a further 4,338 additional students in training – filling 13 per cent of the total predicted shortage.

Recruitment is a key issue for the NHS, and with so much demand for new nurses, and with uncertainty surrounding Brexit seeing the number of migrant nurses from the EU registering to work in the NHS fall significantly, we simply cannot afford for these spaces to remain vacant.

At a time when the UK should be focusing on building talent to support the NHS and the wider health sector in a sustainable way, we should be training the maximum number of nurses possible each year and opening up new routes into the profession, so that everyone with the desire and dedication to become a registered nurse is able to do so, regardless of the barriers to entry.

While some potential students may have missed their target grades or opted not to go to university after confirming their place, the current level of under-subscription suggests that deeper issues are preventing young people from applying to study nursing. So what are the driving factors preventing people from entering the nursing profession?
Barriers to study

Three in 10 (30%) young people (aged 18-24) considered becoming a registered nurse, but ultimately opted against it. The most significant factors were the cost of study, working hours and the perceived stress and pressure associated with being a nurse.

While some deterrents are potentially hard to overcome, others do not need to be a determining factor - they can be easily addressed by institutional changes or different kinds of training. For example, most universities set entry requirements above the requirements of the NMC, while the new Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship in England enables future nurses to earn while they learn, negating the cost of study. Those struggling with travel could benefit from more flexible programmes already available, which deliver blended education both virtually and closer to home.

Reasons for opting against a career in nursing

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<th>Reason</th>
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<tr>
<td>Money</td>
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<td>Working Hours</td>
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<td>Perceived Pressure</td>
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<td>Travel</td>
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<td>Entry Requirements</td>
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<td>Third Party Advice</td>
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Without these barriers to study, seven in 10 (71%) of those who considered studying nursing would still be interested in pursuing a career in the profession. More than a quarter (27%) said that they want a profession that enables them to help people, while 17 per cent believe that nursing is a rewarding career choice, yet unfortunately these motivating factors were not enough to overcome the barriers that exist to entering the profession.

Therefore, by understanding the barriers faced by potential nursing students, it is possible to ensure that those who truly want to become a registered nurse are able to access education. These vacant course places must be filled in the future in order to maximise the number of new nurses entering the profession, which could have a significant positive impact on the nursing numbers crisis.
Explaining the barriers

Barriers range from the financial to the practical, with demographics, particularly age and social background playing a significant role. Money – which could include the cost of study, concern over student loans (where students pay) and the associated costs of getting to and from university – was the biggest barrier to entry across the board, but other factors include perceptions of workload and stress, travel, entry requirements and advice also have an impact.

By investigating these barriers, The Open University has been able to develop a number of solutions and recommendations for Higher Education Institutions and NHS employers, which could help those who are struggling to find a suitable path into the profession.

Money

Money - reflecting the cost of study and salary expectations - was the biggest factor deterring young people from studying nursing, with a third (33%) reporting that financial issues were a factor in their decision.

Now that student loans have replaced bursaries for nursing in England, students have to pay a minimum of £27,000 to become a registered nurse in addition to associated study costs. As a result, many young people who considered a career in nursing decided that the cost of study is too high (19%), especially when considered alongside the starting salary of £22,683 a year. Among those who said cost was a factor in their decision, more than a third (36%) believed that they would never be able to pay off their student loan on a nurse’s salary.

In addition to concerns around student loans in England, the associated costs of study were also a barrier for many young people across the UK. With fewer than 80 Higher Education Institutions offering pre-registration nursing degrees, many would have had to move away from home or travel in order to attend traditional classroom lectures. One in 10 (9%) reported that the cost of travelling to study was too high, while 7 per cent felt that the cost of living away from home was unaffordable.

Working Hours

There are a number of misconceptions around the working hours associated with nursing, which in many cases are leading those interested to opt for an alternative career path. Nearly one in five (17%) thought that the working hours would be too long, with a similar number looking for more sociable hours.

While some were warned of long working hours by a practising nurse or healthcare professional, two in five (40%) were influenced by what they had read in the media or on blogs, which can often exaggerate negative reports. Others had been told this by friends, family and even career advisers without experience of the sector.

It was not only the idea of long working hours that put people off pursuing a career in nursing - for others, it was the idea of shift work and the perceived lack of flexibility. One in 10 (10%) said they needed a career that could fit around existing commitments, which they didn't think nursing could offer. However, many trusts are now offering opportunities for part-time work, compressed hours, or job shares, which could have enabled these people to balance their work and personal commitments.
Perceived Pressure
With mental health very much on the minds of young people, it comes as no surprise that a quarter (24%) had concerns about the pressure and stress they might face in the job, while 17 per cent reported that they did not want to be responsible for the lives of others.

As with longer working hours, over a third (35%) of those who considered studying nursing but opted against it because of stress had assumed this because of what they had read in the media, while a quarter (25%) said they had been advised against it by concerned parents.

Travelling
In addition to being prohibitively expensive for many, the idea of moving away from home or travel to university every day was felt to be an issue by 13 per cent of young people.

For some, it was that travelling or moving away would not fit in with their lifestyle or existing commitments, but for others it was primarily about the time it would have taken or the distance they would have had to cover to travel to a university offering an appropriate course. This effectively excludes some groups from taking up nursing education and could particularly affect more mature learners or those in remote areas.

While some people overcome their reservations about travelling every day or moving away from home, this can lead to issues with retention among newly qualified nurses who may seek to return to their home area soon after they complete their training. This may be a particular risk for NHS Trusts in areas with a high cost of living or that have a large intake from rural areas, potentially leading to significant issues with retention post qualification.

Entry Requirements
Official guidelines published by the Nursing and Midwifery Council set out that those wishing to study to become a registered nurse require only GCSE level maths and English (or equivalent) by the time they start their course. However, nine in 10 (91%) of Higher Education Institutions offering pre-registration nursing degrees across the UK require at least 96 UCAS points, the equivalent of three English A-levels at or above a C-grade, for entry, which can leave some who are passionate about becoming a nurse without the opportunity to apply for a place to do so. Requirements are generally higher in England than elsewhere, with half of universities in Scotland asking for only 64-72 UCAS points.

More than one in 10 (11%) of those considering studying to become a nurse were put off by the entry requirements, and for some (12%) it meant they never truly considered a career in nursing in the first place. Of those who said that entry requirements were an issue for them, more than two in five (42%) had the requisite English and maths skills, while three in 10 (30%) said that the entry requirements were the only thing that prevented them from becoming a registered nurse.

Third Party Advice
While only a small percentage of young people were deterred from pursuing a career in nursing by third party advice, it is interesting to note that the majority of this influence stemmed from family and friends, rather than practising nurses or healthcare professionals. This may well be the result of a continuing drip-feed of negative news and social media content relating to the pressures and difficulties of working in the NHS, with few good-news stories about the satisfaction and achievement of working in healthcare to add balance. However, these concerns are often reduced for many once they enter training and the profession, and find that they are able to access the support or develop the resilience required to overcome these pressures.
Overcoming barriers and entering study

Recruitment into pre-registration nursing programmes is a key issue - but more often than not, students’ doubts are assuaged once they begin their courses.

Half (50%) of those currently studying for a nursing degree had doubts before they started the course, but for most those concerns are no longer an issue. More than two in five (41%) say that finding out about the support offered by the NHS has reassured them about their chosen career path, while more than a quarter (27%) say that they have been reassured by their lecturer or someone working in the profession.

More than a third (37%) believe that their passion for the profession will help them to overcome any challenges, and others see the pros vastly outweighing the cons, with close to three in 10 (28%) saying that the opportunities for continuous professional development override any doubts they were facing.

Course completion

While many are happy with their choice, it is also crucial that those who may be struggling to overcome barriers feel supported and able to go on to become registered nurses. A quarter (24%) of those who begin studying nursing do not complete the course⁷ - the equivalent of around 6,742 potential nurses dropping out from each intake⁸.

Of those currently studying for a nursing degree, half (46%) say that they are happy they chose to study a nursing degree, while the same proportion agree that although they expect nursing will be hard they believe that the pros will outweigh the cons.

However, 12 per cent are considering dropping out, with the majority contemplating a different career in the health sector. In addition to this, one in five (20%) are going to complete their degree, but are no longer sure they wish to become a registered nurse, raising concerns about the stability of the future talent pipeline.

- 24% average attrition rate
- 6,742 potential nurses drop out from each intake
- 1 in 3 are no longer sure they wish to become a registered nurse
Travel
While money was the most significant factor in deterring young people from studying to become a nurse, for those already studying, travel is the greatest concern. More than one in five (21%) say they are not sure if they would like to continue with their studies because they have to live away from home, while 16 per cent report spending a lot of time travelling between home and university to study, which is clearly taking its toll.

In terms of easing the cost, stress and hassle of living away from home or travelling to university, one in five (21%) would like their university to offer more flexibility in programme delivery, while 19 per cent would like to see more nursing courses offer modern technology-enabled learning that reduces the need to travel in order to study.

While many nursing courses still take a ‘traditional’ approach to course delivery, it’s possible that allowing more flexibility, so that nursing students do not have to move or travel away from home, could have a positive impact on retention as well as attrition.

Money
However, money is still a concern among nursing students. Of those considering dropping out, 15 per cent would do so in order to pursue a career where they could make more money, while 7 per cent say they need to start earning a salary right away.

Student nurses in England may not be able to access nursing bursaries but more support would certainly go a long way in encouraging them to complete their training. A quarter (24%) would like the opportunity to earn while they learn, while 15 per cent would appreciate increased financial support.

The new Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship in England, which launched last year following the creation of the apprenticeship levy, could help to reduce the financial burden on those wishing to pursue a career in nursing.

This type of training is certainly attractive, with three quarters (77%) of those studying for a traditional degree reporting that they would prefer to study a degree apprenticeship if they were applying again. Meanwhile, the NHS in England would need to employ 27,500 apprentices in order to use the entirety of its apprenticeship levy funding\(^4\) and secure return on investment – so there are significant benefits to employers as well as demand from prospective students.

Workload
Others are most worried about the stressful working environment they may be faced with if they go on to become a registered nurse. Nearly one in five (17%) think that it will be too high-pressured, while 13 per cent are concerned that they will find the working hours too long.

Nearly a quarter (24%) of those currently studying would like to see a further commitment from governments to increase the number of nurses working in the NHS, in order to reduce some of the stress and workloads faced by some nurses.
The issues faced by those who choose to study nursing, particularly travel and salary, remain prevalent once nurses join the workforce, affecting retention across NHS trusts. Improving retention could be a relatively quick way to improve nursing staff numbers, and yet NHS workforce stability rates have fallen from 89% in 2010/11 to 85% in 2017/18.

As many nurses have to travel or move away from home in order to train, it stands to reason that many may look to move away from their training employer once fully qualified. Three in 10 (29%) of those who are currently studying say they will move to another healthcare employer or region to work as soon as they are fully qualified, with a quarter (23%) planning to move to a healthcare employer closer to home.

In addition, the drive to secure a better salary, benefits or access to continuous professional development will see nearly a quarter (23%) move between employers, which can put additional strain on NHS Trusts as they scramble to fill vacant nursing positions and ensure that they remain adequately staffed, which often means spending more on advertising and recruitment.

This is not sustainable. NHS Trusts are investing significant resources in the education of the future nursing workforce, by paying into the apprenticeship levy in England, for example, yet poor retention of newly qualified nurses leaves them understaffed and out of pocket.

It is therefore essential that steps are taken to address the challenges faced by nurses both during training and once registered; by both increasing retention after qualification and opening up new routes into the profession.

Taking into account the number of nursing students who are frustrated by travelling to study or unhappy living away from home, increasing the flexibility of study could make a real difference to retention. Flexible solutions, such as technology-enabled learning, could ensure that nurses do not have to move away from home in the first place; they could remain and train where they want to be.

For others, new routes such as the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship in England could significantly help to address concerns around salary and student loans whilst encouraging a wider range of people into the nursing profession.

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10 The Health Foundation (2019) A critical moment: NHS staffing trends, retention and attrition
Solutions

With 6 per cent of places to study nursing going unfilled, and a further 24 per cent of students dropping out during their course, it is clear that some of these barriers need to be addressed to ensure that the maximum possible number of nurses are qualifying each year and that healthcare providers have access to the nursing workforce they need in order to continue to deliver a high quality service.

Some of the key issues impacting the attractiveness of the profession also impact retention once nurses have qualified, so understanding and acting to reduce barriers (perceived or real) at the pre-registration stage could also have a significant impact on the resources used to retain nurses and fill vacancies further down the line, as well as boosting the number of registered nurses remaining in the workforce.

Embrace technology-enabled learning

The need to move away from home or travel to study is a deterrent for many people considering a career in nursing, but it also has a significant impact on NHS trusts once nurses qualify. Many of those who move away in order to study indicate they will return back to their home area when qualified. The requirement to study away from home is also a fundamental barrier to widening participation in nursing for those with family and other commitments in their home area that make this impossible.

In today’s digital era Higher Education Institutions can take advantage of new technology that allows them to deliver lectures, materials and support digitally. The Open University successfully delivers all the academic modules within its nursing degrees and apprenticeships in this way, enabling nursing students to live and study in their local community, and therefore reducing the likelihood of them leaving their NHS Trust (or the NHS itself) once qualified.

Such technology-enabled learning allows students to access both live and recorded virtual tutorials and lectures as well as media-rich materials to suit all styles of learning. It also enables students to access study anytime 24/7 to suit their life and working patterns while studying for the theory portion of their degree.

While half of the degree programme is practice based, requiring the provision of face-to-face supervision so that student nurses can learn and perfect the skills required, it is also essential that students learning theory through digital means have adequate support. As a specialist in delivering this blended learning approach, The Open University’s nursing degree and apprenticeship courses ensure that students can develop support communities and access help whenever and however they need it.

Allowing students to learn in a way that suits them via a personalised, technology-enabled approach offers more flexibility and removes a number of deterrents for those interested in studying nursing. It enables students to fit their study around existing commitments and removes travelling to and from traditional university-based lectures, while also removing the costs of doing this – and can therefore aid in encouraging people to study nursing and enter the profession.
Open up access to the profession

The vast majority of universities set entry requirements above those set out by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). More than 9 in 10 (91%) universities require at least 96 UCAS points (equivalent to three English A-levels at C-grade or above), which is a significant blocker to widening participation in nursing as it immediately excludes those from a large variety of backgrounds who may not have been afforded the educational opportunities required to pass these thresholds. Requirements are generally higher in England than elsewhere, with half of universities in Scotland asking for only 64-72 UCAS points.

This exclusion cuts off an important source of potential nursing talent for the profession and the NHS – adding to the issues of recruitment. With 6 per cent of nurse training places going unfilled (equating to 1,446 places) there is a solid argument for reviewing the way many traditional Higher Education Institutions use these thresholds, and a clear need to open up access to the profession both through degrees and other routes.

At The Open University, we never insist on A-levels – instead, we use appropriate and carefully designed selection processes to ensure the suitability of those candidates applying for nursing courses. Our pre-registration nursing degrees have no entry requirements other than those set out by the NMC, which means that all those who are interested in a career in nursing have the opportunity to apply to study with us - wherever they are and whatever their background.

A career in nursing should be open to all those who are passionate about the profession. Those interested should be given the opportunity to work towards becoming a registered nurse over a longer period of time and through a variety of routes. Some careers in particular could be viewed as stepping-stones towards registered nursing. For example, those who become healthcare assistants could study to become nursing associates, then registered nurses as a means of continuous professional development.

New apprenticeship standards in England are particularly geared towards this; they help workers to develop their skills whilst both earning and providing crucial frontline workforce support to healthcare providers. This approach could also result in improved recruitment, retention and productivity within the NHS, while enabling an increase in diversity and widening participation in nursing roles.
Promote flexibility and positive nursing stories

With so many potential applicants to nursing concerned about working hours (24%) and perceived pressure (24%), and receiving discouraging messages from third parties (6%), there is a role for NHS employers, central NHS teams and professional bodies in continuing to promote nursing as a career but also addressing the negative perceptions of working practices and support available for staff.

Many NHS trusts now offer significant flexibility in working arrangements for nurses and other staff, as well as increased support to manage the stress and pressures of working in the frontline of healthcare in the UK.

These positive developments could be promoted more strongly both locally and nationally in order to mitigate negative impressions felt by many considering nursing as a career. Local stakeholders could work to promote nursing as a profession within schools, colleges and communities in order to balance the continual drip-feed of negative media coverage about working in the NHS.

Give nurses the opportunity to earn while they learn

The most significant barrier both for those considering becoming a registered nurse and those currently training was money, mainly the cost of study (where it is paid for) or travel and other commitments in comparison to the salary they would earn once qualified. The removal of bursaries and introduction of student loans for pre-registration nursing degrees in England has made it more difficult for people to enter the profession, so it is important that there are other options for funding available.

The introduction of the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship in England can remove some of the financial barriers. It allows those who do not want to take out a student loan, or who could not afford the associated costs of studying, to earn while they learn, removing some of the financial strain.

Of those for whom cost was the main factor in their decision not to pursue a career in nursing, two in five (40%) said they would have gone on to become a nurse if they could work while studying and more than three-quarters (77%) of those currently studying say they would have been interested in a degree apprenticeship if they were applying to study nursing now.

So while many English NHS employers are struggling to make best use their apprenticeship levy and increase the number of Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeships and the Nursing Associate Higher Apprenticeships (often due to concerns with the costs of backfill) the demand for places on these apprenticeships from potential nursing students is likely to be high.

The NHS is the biggest contributor to the apprenticeship levy in England with a pot worth £200 million a year, and it is important that this funding is used effectively to help address the nursing shortfall. By investing in nursing degree apprenticeships NHS leaders in England can secure good return on their investment and develop a pipeline of new registered nursing talent, whilst also enabling more people to enter the nursing profession by reducing the barriers they face.

Many NHS employers in England are now recruiting existing staff as well as new entrants into these apprenticeships – enabling people who have perhaps worked for many years in healthcare support worker roles, for example, to go on to train as either nurse associates or registered nurses. With providers such as The Open University, which offers a flexible technology-enabled learning model with no additional barriers to entry, these apprenticeships provide a positive additional route into nursing for those who have experienced barriers to traditional nursing study.

Three quarters would have been interested in a Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship if they were applying to study now

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Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship

The Open University’s Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship
The Open University’s Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship helps employers to develop their healthcare support workers (HCSWs) and others towards registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC).

Based on The Open University’s successful practice-based pre-registration nursing programme; a flexible, work-based degree that has helped more than 1,750 students register as qualified nurses since 2002, the apprenticeship can help NHS trusts attract and retain their nursing staff. The Open University already has over 250 student nurses on the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship from a range of NHS and other employers around England.

Programme structure
Throughout the four-year programme, apprentices will, on average, spend two days a week on practice learning, one day a week on protected study time and two days a week undertaking duties within their employment setting.

The Open University's technology-enabled, flexible delivery approach, supported by a network of nursing staff deployed across England, means apprentices are not required to undertake day release to attend campus-based learning. It also means that their study time can easily be adjusted based on service requirements, minimising disruption to service.

Depending on the chosen specialism, apprentices will also develop skills, knowledge and understanding in either adult nursing or mental health nursing in accordance with NMC-approved curriculum for pre-registration nursing degrees.

The Open University have a proven track record of preparing nurses to enter the professional register as either Adult or Mental Health nurses. Subject to successful approval in Spring 2020, we will be expanding our provision to cover preparation of the Child and Learning Disabilities fields of practice.
The Open University has been working with Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust since 2012 to deliver pre-registration and post-registration nursing degree programmes. The work-based programmes are a key part of the Trust’s learning and development strategy which helps it to deliver improved healthcare services to the people of Northamptonshire.

Leigh Green works in the Urgent Care and Assessment Team at the Trust. He has worked in a support worker role for the past 26 years. Through The Open University’s Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship, Leigh has been able to take his career to the next level. Leigh has found the flexible online learning and support from the University and the Trust a real benefit, as he progresses through the programme and immediately applies his learning to his role.

Leigh explained: “I would recommend the apprenticeship route for the nursing degree because you earn a salary, you are supported, and the academic work builds up gently. The support is there from The Open University, and the support is also there from your employer and colleagues.

As well as the benefits that I get from training and working on the degree apprenticeship programme, there are also benefits for the Trust. It is investing in me to develop my skills which ultimately helps to develop the service and helps improve patient or service user outcomes. It helps build up the workforce and it’s about bringing new skills into the teams and into the services.”

Lisa Gammon, Higher Apprenticeships and Preceptorship Project Lead at the Trust, added: “What apprenticeships have allowed us to do is to build the role around an apprenticeship for the next four years. They grow, they develop new skills, they learn, they work, so it’s a whole different culture that we’re developing.

It brings such value to the individual because when we think about work/life balance, many of our student nurses that are on the programme have families, they have commitments, they have a job and they have to be part of a team that delivers a service. It allows them to be flexible.”

open.ac.uk/business/northamptonshire-nhs
For 50 years, The Open University has led the way in innovative, part-time education, developing workplace learning and development solutions for employers (across the private, public and voluntary sectors), as well as educating individuals.

As a trusted provider of nursing education for more than 16 years, The Open University is committed to providing high quality education that can fit around nurses’ and their employers’ needs. Our Adult and Mental Health Nursing Degrees have satisfaction rates of 95% and 98% respectively, with a 91% retention rate across both programmes. Since 2002, over 1,700 nurses have qualified through The Open University. Currently, we work with over 180 employers and we have over 1,450 students and apprentices on our nursing degree programmes.

We believe that The Open University’s brand of flexible work-based learning can provide some solutions to the issues faced by those considering and currently studying to become a registered nurse, which could significantly help with recruitment and widening participation in nursing. Our blended learning delivery, which combines digital learning with local face-to-face support, means that student nurses do not have to travel or move away from home in order to study - and just like all our degree programmes there are no entry requirements other than those set by regulators or employers.

For healthcare employers considering investing in our Pre-Registration Nursing Programme or our Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship, our flexible and adaptable approach enables consistent learning to be delivered at scale, across geographically dispersed workforces, without apprentices having to travel away from the workplace to study.

For more information, please visit: open.ac.uk/business/registered-nurse

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Methodology

Breaking Barriers to Nursing was developed using the expertise and experience of The Open University’s nursing department, in conjunction with Freedom of Information Request data and data from a commissioned survey of registered nurses, those studying nursing and those who considered studying nursing.

Freedom of Information Requests
The Open University issued requests to 77 Higher Education Institutions the UK in March 2019 under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. 68 per cent of these organisations responded to The Open University’s request for information.

Market Research
The Open University commissioned Savanta to undertake a survey of 1,000 young people aged between 18-24 who had considered studying nursing at degree level. 74 of those surveyed were registered nurses and 236 were currently studying to become a nurse. The research was carried out between 12 and 23 April 2019.

For further information including a full methodology and data breakdowns, please contact:
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