

# Nine percent doesn't tell the whole story.

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**It is always good to see a focus on nursing in Roy's daily blog. We don't always agree on nursing issues, but Roy is always willing to listen to alternative views, supported by evidence. When I read the reference to the QNI District Nurse Education Audit in Roy's column last week, I had to let him know his interpretation was not quite accurate!**



**I**t was not a lack of interest in the District Nursing programme that led to the 9% drop in District Nursing students this academic year (2022/23).

It is the funding cycle. In England, community nursing provider organisations have confirmation of funding to release senior staff for the District Nursing programme way too late in the annual cycle to enable them to undertake the programme.

This has been happening for years and is part of the year-by-year funding by HEE - now NHSE/WTE - which does not have a confirmed central budget, until too late in the year for effective workforce planning and development in community nursing services.

Ideally, community providers would be notified at the very

latest in January of the year that they will select experienced senior staff nurses to undertake the District Nursing programme, which starts in universities in September.

If they have confirmed funding by January, the process of internal (and

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sometimes external) advertising can begin and the selection process (application form, shortlisting and interview) completed in partnership with the university by latest April.

This gives 4 months to plan the cover and backfill for the six to ten vacancies created across the organisation by senior staff nurses moving into training. This of course

requires advertising and recruitment, but it is an opportunity for progression for less experienced staff nurses – and is an important part of career progression, supporting retention.

The District Nursing programme is an intense one-year full time or two-year part time postgraduate degree, preparing them to step into a role which includes; working at an advanced practice level, developing leadership and

management skills, learning how to plan the work of the team, assessing and managing risk, making multiple decisions alone behind closed doors for patients with the most complex of needs – and supporting their loved ones.

The nurse going onto the programme needs advance notice to plan their life and prepare for the year where

50% is spent in a university setting and 50% learning on placement.

*They will need to plan changes to childcare/caring responsibilities, travel arrangements to university and placements in advance of the start of the programme. And preparation for the studying.*

Typically, the community service providers are told just weeks before the university programme starts and there is literally no time to plan...

... so places do not get taken up and many potential applicants disappointed with a lost opportunity.

This has been a documented issue for years - I used to deal with it as a university Dean before my time at the QNI.

The issue is that HEE/WTE have been unable to confirm to provider organisations that funding is available for the District Nursing programme until too late in the cycle, due to delayed confirmation of national annual budgets for education.

Some of the more experienced Directors of Nursing will take a risk that the funding for the District Nurse training places they have requested through regional HEE offices will be agreed and start the cycle on trust, but most will not.

This is a fundamental issue that has led to the decline in the District Nursing places being taken up in 2022 and is well known. When places are

not taken up, assumptions are made that the places are not wanted/needed, just as Roy did. That could not be further from the reality. We just need the funding cycle to be shifted back by 8 months (12 would be better) to allow proper workforce planning - or the same cycle will continue, and we will see an ever-diminishing number of people being able to be cared for at home. Better still, now we have the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, there is an opportunity to provide assurance to service providers of the funding for the next three years and to allow community providers to truly plan their workforce development ahead to meet their population's need.

**This is fixable. Most importantly we owe it to the communities served by the District Nursing services to make that fix as a matter of urgency.**