

Apprenticeships as pathway to care careers: Ethical challenges and opportunities for professions

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Readers of this journal are acutely aware of challenges relating to the recruitment and retention of nurses and other care professionals. Readers are also aware of ethical issues arising from professional migration.¹ Efforts to develop the local workforce and to reduce, if not eliminate, the recruitment of professionals from the global south to the north are now prioritised. In the United Kingdom, strategies to increase the workforce include increasing access to health and social care professions via apprenticeships.² Routes to nursing careers in the United Kingdom now include apprenticeships which lead to the roles of Nursing Associate and Registered Nurse. These routes are gaining in popularity and are supported by employers. Apprenticeship roles enable those working as, for example, care assistants to 'learn as they earn' and for employers to 'grow their own'.

There has, however, been some resistance and lack of understanding regarding the 2-year work-based learning apprenticeship programme leading to the role of Nursing Associate. They have been viewed as 'cheap labour' and with concerns relating to 'substitution' for registered nurses.³ The role of apprenticeships generally, in relation to nursing, may be challenged as a backward rather than progressive step for the profession. Surely, it might be argued, this returns us to days of hospital-based training with some semblance of 'sitting by Nellie' (or 'watching Joe') which refers to learning a job or role by observing an experienced practitioner. Days when there was little, if any, focus on evidence- and values-based practice. Days when learning was by rote, underpinned by rules and with scant attention to critical thinking. Such assumptions relating to the limitations of the past, which focused on training, and the characteristics of contemporary apprenticeships are misleading and inaccurate. Such assumptions downplay the potential, characteristics and opportunities which apprenticeships offer for the development of the profession. In this Editorial, we reflect on some of the ethical challenges and opportunities that arise for individuals, professions and care systems. University nurse educators play a crucial role in ensuring individuals, the profession and care systems are advantaged by the apprenticeship route to care careers. First, we provide a short introduction to the evolution of apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships are not new with history dating back to craft guilds in the United Kingdom in the Middle Ages.^{4,5} In early times, they enabled people to qualify as blacksmiths, carpenters and weavers, with the apprentice signing a contract with a 'master', a skilled crafts person. In 1563, apprenticeships had legal support from the Statute of Apprentices.⁶ The apprentices would generally live with their 'masters' who were considered responsible for their 'moral welfare',⁷ for sharing life skills as well as the skills of their trade. 'Guilds' played an important role in setting training standards and in regulating the quality of training and conditions of employment. They also provided support for apprenticeships and masters. Apprentices made a significant contribution in areas such as telecommunications, construction and care.

Ethical challenges relating to the apprenticeship route to a nursing career are, arguably, threefold: apprentices may be treated as second class, as inferior to students on conventional university programmes and as being disadvantaged due to their reduced time studying in a university (usually 1 day per week); the apprenticeship route is detrimental to the profession of nursing, tainted by the 'sitting by Nellie' assumption; it may be assumed that students are not adequately exposed to the knowledge, skills and values required for a progressive profession; and, thirdly, it might be assumed that care systems are short-changed by practitioners who pursue an apprenticeship route rather than students who have availed of a full-time university programme.

These challenges are, in our view, overcome by positive partnerships between employers and universities, partnerships which put the learning needs and aspirations of apprenticeships – and the needs of care recipients – at the centre. Whilst students pursuing an apprenticeship route to a care career may not have a 'typical' student experience, this does not mean that their experience is sub-optimal. To provide nurse apprenticeships with the best possible experience, nurse educators have an obligation to maintain a high-quality educational experience comparable with non-apprenticeship routes. This ensures that apprenticeships develop the knowledge, skills and values required for a contemporary profession responding to increasing complexity in health and social care systems. Nurse educators need also to provide 'comprehensive induction' with signposting to information and resources to set apprentices up for success; provide individualised study and well-being

support as needed; encourage and incentivise engagement with the wider campus extra-curricular activities; and celebrate success.⁷

Our own experiences of apprenticeships have been extremely positive as we witnessed the flourishing of Nursing Associates and the development of confidence, competence and ambition. These are people, mostly women from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, who would have been unable to access a conventional university degree programme. They are now progressing to nurse registration via the apprenticeship route. The opportunities presented by an apprenticeship route far outweigh perceived challenges. Apprenticeships have a rich history and continue to evolve. The current funding model enables students of nursing to be educated without them bearing the costs of traditional full-time University routes. Students can, therefore, earn a living whilst working towards nurse registration and take advantage of many career progression opportunities in practice, leadership, research and education. There are challenges to overcome, including NHS funding and prioritisation as a new UK government takes up the reins. It is our view that the multiple opportunities created by apprenticeships must stay in clear focus. This is likely to boost home grown nurse professionals and reduce reliance on an overseas workforce. This also increases participation of those who would otherwise have limited opportunities to access higher education. Ultimately this builds a nursing workforce that is highly skilled, motivated and rewarded. To maximise the benefits of apprenticeship routes, however, the onus is on nurse educators and employers to work together to ensure apprentices are valued and provided with the best possible learning experiences and support.

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