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Trends in nursing applications

The University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data for 2023 shows a mix of trends in the UK's higher education nursing sector (Council of Deans of Health, 2023; UCAS, 2023). A total of 48 625 students applied for nursing courses, reflecting a complex picture of fluctuating interest post pandemic. Although there has been a 13.4% decrease from the heightened numbers witnessed in the pandemic, it is notable that these figures remain 9.7% above pre-pandemic levels. This suggests a sustained, if somewhat moderated, interest in nursing as a career.

Last year saw a significant increase in the number of applications to all university courses by individuals disclosing a mental health condition, with the figure reaching 36 000, a substantial rise from 22 000 the previous year (an increase of 63.6%) and more than double the 16 000 reported in 2019.

Some 26 330 applicants were accepted onto undergraduate nursing courses, marking a 10.6% decrease from the previous year. Despite this decline, the proportion of accepted applicants has increased to 54.1%, indicating a more competitive landscape and perhaps a higher calibre of applicants. The distribution of acceptances across different types of institutions varied, with lower tariff providers accepting 15 025 students, medium tariff providers accepting 8795, and higher tariff providers taking in 2510 students.

There was a higher number of female applicants than males. This sustains the long-standing trend of the nursing profession being predominantly female dominated. However, the inclusion of male students in nursing programmes is essential for providing balanced perspectives and challenging traditional stereotypes.

International applicants have slightly increased to 895. This rise is modest but signifies the global appeal of UK nurse education and the valuable diversity international students bring to the learning environment and future workforce.

All age groups have seen a decline in acceptance, with the most significant drop in the 25-29 age bracket, decreasing by 21.8% from 2022. This may reflect the economic and personal pressures facing this age group, particularly those who might be considering a career change or advancement through nursing. The decrease of 14.1% in 18-year-olds entering nursing courses is also noteworthy, potentially indicating shifts in the aspirations of younger generations or their perception of nursing as a career path.

This UCAS data are more than just numbers; they reflect the changing dynamics in healthcare education and broader societal trends. The decrease in applications and acceptances could be attributed to various factors, including the intense pressures that health professionals have faced during the pandemic, which might deter potential applicants. The psychological and physical toll of the pandemic on healthcare workers has been widely publicised, possibly influencing the decision-making of those considering the profession.

The increased acceptance rate, however, suggests that universities are perhaps responding to the need for more qualified nurses by adjusting their selection criteria or expanding their capacities. This is a positive sign, indicating resilience and adaptability within the education sector to meet healthcare needs.

The gender disparity in nursing is a persistent issue. The reasons behind this are complex, but it is a gap that needs addressing. A more gender-balanced workforce can lead to a more empathetic, comprehensive, and effective care environment. Attracting more men into nursing, and supporting them through their education and career, is crucial.

The slight increase in international students is a positive development, reflecting the UK's ongoing appeal as a centre for nursing education. International students not only contribute to the cultural and experiential diversity here but also, upon returning home, elevate the global standards of nursing with the skills and knowledge they have acquired.

The decline in applicants across all age groups is concerning. It suggests that nursing may be losing its appeal to both traditional school leavers and those seeking a mid-career change. The reasons behind this trend could be many, from the perceived challenges and stresses of the job to the financial implications of studying. Addressing

these perceptions and realities is crucial in ensuring a steady influx of passionate and dedicated individuals into the profession.

The 2023 UCAS data present a multifaceted picture. Although there is a decline in numbers from the pandemic peak, interest remains above pre-pandemic levels. The shifts in demographics and the ongoing gender disparity raise questions about the future composition of the nursing workforce.

References

Council of Deans of Health. Briefing: UCAS end of cycle data 2023. https://tinyurl.com/5n9y4aus (accessed 9 April 2024)

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