The new Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) standards for pre-registration nursing education

Advice on implementation for health services in Scotland

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Key messages

The new Nursing and Midwifery Council standards for pre-registration nursing education, published in September 2010, reflect the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders on how nursing should be developed for the future. They also reflect the changing face of health care in the UK by aiming to prepare nurses who can respond flexibly to current and future challenges.

The new standards are highly complementary to many national service drivers and will support the achievement of Scotland’s three NHS quality ambitions.

It is important that service organisations in Scotland understand the changes to pre-registration nursing programmes not only to ensure they meet their responsibilities in supporting students’ learning in practice, but also to ensure they are best prepared to realise the opportunities that will be presented by nurses emerging from the new programmes over time.

The new standards do not herald a wholesale change in the way nurses will be prepared. The core underpinnings of nursing will remain. However, they do bring about some significant changes to programme structures and outcomes.

The core underpinning for the new pre-registration nursing programmes is a set of generic competencies that will apply to nurses in all four fields of practice (adult, children, mental health and learning disability). The generic competencies, augmented by field-specific competencies acquired by students as their programmes progress, will enable nurses emerging from the programmes to practise effectively and flexibly in diverse settings with service users from across the age spectrum and with a wide range of physical and psychological health challenges.

The “common foundation” and “branch” structure of the programmes will be replaced by programme structures that combine generic and field-specific learning, with field-specific learning increasing as the programme progresses.

All registered nurses emerging from the new pre-registration programmes will have a degree as the minimum level of education preparation.
Graduate pre-registration nursing programmes based on the new standards will be introduced incrementally in Scotland between September 2011 and September 2013. Services will be seeing students on the new programmes from late 2011 and can expect the first graduates to emerge in autumn 2014.

At least half of pre-registration nursing programmes are delivered in service settings, so it is vital that service staff play a key role in the design and implementation of the new programmes.

Existing strong partnerships among service organisations and higher education institutions throughout Scotland will be vital in the move towards the introduction of the new graduate programmes.

A strategic approach to engaging with higher education institutions should be adopted by services well in advance of the new programmes being launched.

The development of the new programmes provides an opportunity for HEI and service staff to work together to ensure that programme design, structure and practice learning opportunities reflect contemporary service priorities and that service users gain maximum benefit from the skills and qualities of nurses graduating from the programmes.

The introduction of the new programmes does not mean that existing mentors in service settings will have to undergo further formal training to meet the changes. The basic skill set of existing mentors will be the foundation for mentorship of the new students.

Understanding how, and why, the NMC has developed the standards will support services to ensure a smooth transition for the new students and to grasp the opportunities presented by the emergence of a nursing workforce educated to degree level.
Ringing the changes ...

Following wide consultation throughout the UK, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has developed new standards for pre-registration nursing education. The standards will govern how pre-registration programmes across all four nursing “fields”\(^1\) – adult, children, mental health and learning disability – will be developed from September 2011 onwards.

It is important that service organisations\(^2\) in Scotland understand the changes not only to ensure they meet their responsibilities in supporting students’ learning in practice, but also to ensure they are best prepared to realise the opportunities that will be presented by nurses emerging from the new programmes over time.

This briefing paper explains the nature of the changes as they will apply in Scotland and provides advice on how service organisations, working in close partnership with higher education institutions (HEIs) and other stakeholders, can prepare to engage with the standards and maximise the opportunities they present.

What are the changes?

The new standards do not herald a wholesale change in the way nurses will be prepared. The core underpinnings of nursing – providing services in a caring, compassionate way, protecting people’s safety, promoting wellbeing and practising from a solid evidence base – will remain.

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1 The term “fields” now replaces “branches”.
2 In this briefing paper, “services” and “service organisations” refer to NHS boards and other services who provide practice learning experiences for students on pre-registration nursing programmes.
But service needs are changing, and pre-registration nursing programmes need to change with them. The new standards are fundamentally about preparing a nursing workforce that can effectively meet the complex needs of service users, families and carers and the associated challenges nurses will face in service settings now and in the future. Pre-registration programmes from 2011 on will therefore have a greater focus on preparing nurses to work flexibly within a range of caring environments and with a wide spectrum of service users, carers, communities, professionals and agencies.

The new pre-registration nursing programmes will have a different structure from those that exist currently. There will no longer be a common foundation and branch structure: instead, the core underpinning of the new programmes will be a set of generic competencies that will apply to nurses in all four fields of practice and which will be augmented by field-specific competencies acquired by students as their programmes progress. The new programmes will focus on students’ acquisition of the generic and field-specific competencies from the outset, with more specialist knowledge being developed over time.

The generic competencies are designed to equip nurses emerging from the programmes to practise effectively and flexibly in diverse settings, including hospitals, care homes, people’s homes and in the community, with service users from across the age spectrum and with a wide range of physical and psychological health challenges. The nurses will also be enabled to:

- provide high-quality, person-centred care from a strong values-, rights- and evidence-based foundation for practice
- provide services closer to people’s homes
- contribute effectively to modern health care delivery teams
- contribute to, and lead, the planning, delivery and evaluation of services
- act as role models and promote the educational development of colleagues
- supervise other staff to deliver high-quality care.

Nurses practising in this way will need high levels of analytical and problem-solving skills. They will need to be able to evaluate and apply evidence to their practice. And they will need to be able to provide leadership in a wide range of environments and in a variety of circumstances.
The NMC has therefore decided that **by September 2013, all pre-registration nursing programmes will be at degree level.** This means that in future, all new registered nurses emerging from the programmes will have a degree as a minimum education qualification.

Other key elements promoted by the new standards are:

- increased opportunities for students to take part in interprofessional learning and to share learning with students from other nursing fields
- continued promotion of a wide entry gate to nursing programmes and the development of a diverse nursing workforce
- further efforts to involve service users in student selection, assessment and curriculum design.

**Why is change necessary?**

The NMC undertook a long and comprehensive process of consultation with stakeholders, including service users and the public, to gather perspectives on how nurses should be prepared. They also reviewed health service policy and analysed how health services are evolving throughout the UK, particularly in relation to the Shifting the Balance of Care initiative and the opportunities that are opening to nurses to develop their practice and extend their services.

From this, the NMC concluded that the new standards were necessary to ensure that nurses in all fields of practice would be able to:

- meet the physical, psychological and emotional needs of all people in their care regardless of age
- respond competently to the complex challenges they face within their field of practice, including the ability to recognise when referral to more senior or specialist support is required
- provide high-quality care in a range of environments, including hospitals, homes and the community
- value diversity and respect people’s cultures, beliefs and opinions
- become effective leaders and make a full and valued contribution to developing colleagues, supervising staff and leading innovation
- develop their own knowledge, skills and competencies throughout their careers.
What is the timescale for introduction of the new standards?

The NMC approves pre-registration nursing programmes for a five-year period. The new standards will therefore be introduced to coincide with the programme approval schedule. This means that in Scotland, they will be introduced to new programmes approved to commence in September 2011 and to all remaining programmes by September 2013.

The 11 HEIs who offer pre-registration nursing programmes in Scotland will consequently be adopting the new standards at different times. Five HEIs will commence the new programmes in September 2011:

- Edinburgh Napier University
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- University of Dundee
- University of Glasgow
- University of Stirling.

Five will start in September 2012:

- Robert Gordon University
- The Open University
- University of Abertay
- University of Edinburgh
- University of the West of Scotland.

And one will commence in September 2013:

- Queen Margaret University

This means that services will be seeing students on the new programmes from late 2011 and can expect the first graduates to emerge in autumn 2014.
How can services best engage with the new programmes?

From a Scottish perspective, the new standards are highly complementary to many national service drivers, particularly in relation to promoting quality, improving patient experience and increasing patient safety.

In driving excellence in degree-level pre-registration programmes, the new standards will support the achievement of Scotland’s three NHS quality ambitions:

- **mutually beneficial partnerships between service users, their families and those delivering health care services**: the new standards strongly promote the active inclusion of service users and carers in all aspects of care and advocate multidisciplinary, multi-agency working
- **no avoidable injury or harm to people from the health care they receive**: protection of the public and promotion of patient safety are central tenets of the new standards
- **the most appropriate treatments, interventions, support and services being provided at the right time and wasteful or harmful variation being eradicated**: the standards drive evidence-based, protocol-driven interventions from nurses and their colleagues in health care teams.

At least half of pre-registration nursing programmes is delivered in service settings. It is therefore vital that service staff are prepared to support the new students as they emerge, ensuring they meet their responsibilities in supporting students’ learning in practice and realising the opportunities that will be presented by new nurses emerging from the programmes over time. This will require attention to the following issues.
Developing a strategic approach
Ensuring a seamless changeover from old programmes to new, enabling students to meet their learning needs in service settings and ensuring service staff feel confident and competent to support the new students requires a strategic approach to be adopted at organisational level. This should put in place transparent governance, educational, partnership, monitoring and reporting processes. Communication systems that ensure all stakeholders, including service users and the public, remain “in the loop” about the reasons behind the changes and how the new students are being assimilated within service settings should be a key element of this approach.

Planning the workforce
The well-honed leadership, critical-analysis and decision-making skills the graduate nurses emerging from the programmes will posses offer opportunities for service organisations to consider how workforce skill mixes can be developed to ensure maximum utilisation of the nurses’ skills and qualities. The ability to organise services and supervise the work of others will be key elements of the nurses’ armoury: this presents excellent opportunities for services to shape the nursing workforce appropriately by, for example, fully realising the potential of support worker staff in delivering clinical services under registered nurse supervision.

Preparing mentors
Practice learning will remain an integral component of the new programmes. It is recognised that “good clinical environments are good learning environments, and vice versa”. Ensuring clinical environments are prepared and supported to provide the best possible learning experiences is therefore crucial.

Registered nurse mentors and supervisors drawn from substantive service staff across Scotland have been working enormously hard to ensure students have access to quality learning experiences in practice placements and meet their learning objectives. The mentors have completed HEI preparation courses and have access to support from practice education facilitators (PEFs) in NHS boards and in some other sectors.

It is important to emphasise that the introduction of the new programmes does not mean these mentors will have to undergo further formal training to meet the changed needs of students.

Certainly, mentors will have to understand the new learning objectives and appreciate that each student will be studying at degree level. But the core issues at the heart of mentorship – issues such as understanding different learning styles, being committed to providing or facilitating a wide range of positive learning experiences for students and having the ability to assess students’ performance and readiness for progression – remain unchanged. The basic skill set of existing mentors will therefore be the foundation for mentorship of the new students.

At organisational level, services can support mentors by developing their skills and confidence in meeting the needs of new students. PEFs will play a key role in this.

**Maximising partnerships with HEIs**

Service organisations throughout Scotland have developed strong partnerships with HEIs. These partnerships will be vital in the move towards the introduction of the new programmes, with services and HEIs working together to:

- fulfil their responsibilities in ensuring nurses graduating from the programmes are fit for practice
- develop appropriate programme curricula that meet the new standards and reflect local contexts
- deliver the curricula effectively
- identify, prepare and provide a range of high-quality service placements in different clinical environments
- establish effective student recruitment and selection processes
- promote nursing as an exciting and rewarding career option
- monitor progress and identify the need for change.
Moving towards the new programmes ...

The new NMC standards for pre-registration nursing education reflect the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders on how nursing should be developed for the future. They also reflect the changing face of health care in the UK by aiming to prepare nurses who can respond flexibly not only to the challenges services face now, but also to those they will face in the future. These will include an ageing population, increases in the incidence of long-term conditions and a growing desire among the public to access health care services closer to home in their own communities.

There are obvious opportunities for NHS and other health and social care services to benefit from the nurses who will emerge from the new programmes. These nurses will have degree-level preparation as a minimum and will be equipped with a wide range of skills and competencies which, after the vital acquisition of clinical experience under the supervision of senior colleagues, will position them very strongly to lead and drive necessary service changes, promote service user safety and wellbeing and enhance people’s experiences of services.

The development of the new programmes therefore provides an opportunity for HEI and service staff to work together to ensure that programme design, structure and practice learning opportunities reflect contemporary service priorities and that service users gain maximum benefit from the skills and qualities of nurses graduating from the programmes.

Understanding how, and why, the NMC has developed the standards will support services to ensure a smooth transition for the new students and to grasp the opportunities presented by the emergence of a graduate nursing workforce.

Resource
The new NMC standards for pre-registration nursing education can be accessed at:
http://standards.nmc-uk.org/PublishedDocuments/Standards%20for%20pre-registration%20nursing%20education%2016082010.pdf