Meeting the requirements for becoming a nurse lecturer

OVER the past few decades nursing has transformed itself from an occupation whose members are poorly educated and classed as ‘unskilled workers’ into a profession of highly educated, autonomous, career-minded practitioners. This educational and theoretical shift facilitates care delivery that is efficient, effective and based on the best available evidence.

Another result of these changes is the creation of new roles and opportunities for nurses in a variety of settings. With so many opportunities available it is essential that nurses embrace career planning as an integral part of their professional development.

Career planning involves ‘a continuous process of self-assessment and goal setting’ (Kleinkeicht and Hefferin, 1982), which may mean attending specialist courses, academic development to graduate and postgraduate level as well as developing the clinical skills required, perhaps by practising in a variety of different clinical settings.

It is essential that nurses use their time and finances as efficiently as possible, and this is where career planning plays an important role. This article reports on a study investigating what universities look for when recruiting nurse lecturers. It should be useful for nurses who may be contemplating a career as a nurse lecturer, but are unsure what qualifications and experience they would need.

Changes in nurse education

Nurse education has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past 15 years, with changes in both course structure and delivery. Two key documents, Making a Difference (Department of Health, 1999) and Fitness for Practice (UKCC, 1999), showed that different approaches are required to enable students to link theory to practice so that they can be ‘fit for purpose’ and ‘fit for practice’ (McLoughlin et al, 2002).

This has resulted in a variety of innovative approaches to learning, such as problem-based learning and computer-assisted learning, as well as the adoption of a student-centred learning approach. Such an approach is said to promote student autonomy, self-direction and critical thinking (McLoughlin et al, 2002).

As methods of teaching and learning have changed, so too have the skills needed by lecturers. The skills needed to deliver formal lectures are different from those required to facilitate problem-based learning.

As the skills of the lecturer have changed, so too have the entry requirements for lecturership posts. Despite so much innovation, there seems to be little consensus on the entry requirements for these posts, in terms of skills, education and experience. A study was undertaken in order to address this issue.

The study method

Representatives from 25 universities throughout the UK were invited to complete a questionnaire. A purposive sampling technique was used to include different geographical regions around the UK, but no attempt was made to classify universities as either ‘red brick’ or ‘modern’. Each participant was asked to complete the questionnaire within three weeks of receipt in order to speed up the rate of response, and any questionnaires received after this date were not analysed.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections, the first of which looked at the recent recruitment of nurse lecturers within each university, methods of programme delivery and the timeframe involved before newly recruited lecturers would be considered to be working effectively. The second section looked at the person specification for a nursing lecturer. This included 20 criteria organised into four areas: qualifications, experience, skills/abilities and personal qualities. Participants were asked to indicate whether they felt each criterion was essential, desirable or not required. Participants were also asked to add any criteria that they felt were necessary for the role.

The criteria included in this form were drawn from various person specifications collected from different university personnel departments over a six-month period. This was achieved by looking for appropriate vacancies on a fortnightly basis among those advertised in the Nursing Times, on an academic jobs website (www.jobs.ac.uk) and on the university vacancy pages. Two colleagues who were not involved with the study...
validated the criteria.

All participants were assured of anonymity, and no attempt was made to code or identify them in any way. It was felt that anonymity would enhance the level of honesty in responses received.

**Analysing the results**

Of the 25 questionnaires that were distributed, 16 were returned, which equated to a response rate of 64 per cent. All questionnaires received were completed in full. Three completed questionnaires were received after the cut-off date and were not, therefore, included in the results.

**Responses to section 1**

Of the 16 universities that took part in the study, 14 had advertised and filled a vacancy within the previous six months, which gave a good indication that the information and comments given in the questionnaires were up to date and driven by current demand and requirements.

Participants were asked to rate the overall standard of applicants to posts they had advertised recently. The results showed that 57 per cent reported the level of applicants to be as expected, 14 per cent were better than expected and 29 per cent were worse than expected. The reasons given for poor standards were:

- Not enough qualifications;
- Inarticulate;
- Backward looking;
- No understanding of recent changes;
- Insular;
- No experience with research;
- No published work;
- A lack of knowledge of educational arena;
- A lack of appreciation of the breadth and depth of the role.

Despite the lower-than-expected standard of the applicants, all 14 institutions managed to fill their advertised posts.

Participants were then asked to indicate how quickly they expected the newly recruited lecturers to be working effectively. The responses were as follows:

- Immediately – 15 per cent;
- Within one month – 32 per cent;
- Within three months – 32 per cent;
- Three to six months – 12 per cent;
- More than six months – 6 per cent.

One respondent mentioned that at his or her university, newly appointed lecturers were mentored for one year, whereas in another new lecturers were given a reduced workload for the first three months. The majority of respondents indicated that newly appointed lecturers were expected to be working effectively within one to three months.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the methods of programme/curriculum delivery used at their respective universities. The methods used were as follows:

- Large lectures;
- Small lectures;
- Seminar group work;
- Problem-based learning (or scenario-based learning);
- Computer-assisted learning;
- One-to-one;
- Self-directed learning.

Respondents were asked to indicate the most sought-after characteristics for nurse lecturers working at their university. This was an open section of the questionnaire, in which respondents were asked to add their own comments (Box 1, p34).

**Responses to section 2**

Respondents were asked to comment on five criteria relating to the applicant’s qualifications. The results are shown in Fig 1.

Participants were then asked to comment on nine different areas of experience (Fig 2, p35). The most sought-after areas were:

- Recent clinical experience – considered essential by 31 per cent of respondents;
- Publication in journals – considered essential by 31 per cent of respondents;
- Experience of teaching in higher education – considered essential by 25 per cent of respondents;
- Experience of research activity – considered essential by 25 per cent of respondents.

The next section looked at skills and abilities such as IT skills, commitment to collaboration between practice and education, and ability to work in a multidisciplinary team (Fig 3, p35). Surprisingly, only 50 per cent of respondents felt that IT skills were essential to the role.

Finally, respondents were asked to comment on personal qualities. The results were as follows:

- Excellent communicator – considered essential by 88 per cent of respondents, and desirable by 12 per cent;
- Ability to teach at pre and postregistration levels – considered essential by 63 per cent of respondents, and desirable by 37 per cent.

**The results**

**Further education**

Initially, new lecturers seem to put great emphasis on attaining academic qualifications. Once bachelor-level qualifications are obtained there does appear to be some confusion over whether a master’s degree is necessary. Most nurses who choose to become lecturers already work full-time in clinical or clinically associated posts. As time is precious, careful consideration should be given to ensure that time and effort are maximised in the quest for lectureship status. Whether this time should be used to obtain a teaching qualification or a master’s degree is often a consideration.

Many master’s courses are available via either the teaching or research route. It is important that students choose a course that is enjoyable to them and suited to their budget because a high percentage of part-time students tend to fund themselves. Course fees vary considerably from £1,000 to more than £3,500. Studying part-time for a postgraduate certificate in education can

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**KEYWORDS**

- Education
- Nurse lecturer
- Career planning

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For related articles on this subject and links to relevant websites see www.nursingtimes.net
be time-consuming and difficult if undertaken alongside full-time employment. Part-time courses usually last for two years and students must also teach an average of 250 hours during the two-year course.

A total of 94 per cent of respondents felt that lecturers should hold registered nurse status and 81 per cent indicated that possessing a first degree was essential to the role.

Many of the respondents highlighted the fact that lecturers are required to teach across all educational programmes, which include preregistration, post-registration, bachelor’s and master’s level courses. It was, therefore, quite surprising to find that only 37 per cent of respondents felt that having a higher degree was essential to the role. However, 63 per cent stated that this would be desirable.

The need for nurse lecturers to hold a teaching qualification came lower down the list, with only 31 per cent of respondents feeling that this was essential. However, 50 per cent did state that it was desirable, while only 12 per cent felt it was not necessary.

These results indicate that bachelor’s level education is a must for anyone wishing to become a nurse lecturer. It is then a matter of personal choice whether to study for a master’s degree or a teaching qualification. Having made the choice, it can only be hoped that the entry requirements for lecturer posts do not change before the qualification has been gained.

Possessing additional professional qualifications was the least required criteria, although 69 per cent of respondents felt that this could be desirable to the post. No specification was made regarding the type of additional qualifications that were required.

Other experience

Research activity and dissemination is becoming increasingly important for lecturers, not only to provide an evidence base for practice or to evaluate educational effectiveness, but also for the individual institution’s research assessment exercise (RAE).

Traditionally nursing has fared poorly when compared with other academic disciplines. Indeed the latest round of RAE scores placed nursing 69th out of 69. On an institutional basis, low RAE scores could have funding implications because low scoring institutions receive no funding from the Higher Education Funding Council.

It is no wonder then that this skill is becoming a much higher priority than it was previously. Many lecturers are now required to develop a research profile with activity, publications and income generation incorporated as
targets for achievement. Therefore, it is beneficial for newly appointed lecturers to have at least some experience in this field.

Recent clinical experience is also becoming more of a prerequisite to the appointment of a nurse lecturer. In the past, lecturers tended to be removed from practice and there were concerns that this further widened the theory-practice gap. Students had begun to question the clinical credibility of lecturers, which caused problems when they tried to link theory to practice.

Practice informs theory and theory informs practice in a cyclical manner, so outdated clinical skills could have been responsible for creating a break in this cycle. Appointing lecturers with recent clinical competence aims to provide a complete cycle while bringing the subject ‘alive’ to students. It is also essential from the perspective of research activity and dissemination.

As a result, recent clinical experience and research activity appear to be desirable to potential employers, as well as experience of teaching in higher education. One may wonder how anyone is expected to develop experience in all these fields. However, while 75 per cent of respondents thought this was desirable, only 25 per cent thought it was essential.

Universities do not expect every applicant for a nurse lecturer post to have experience in all areas, but it is important that they try to demonstrate an interest in achieving it. For example, although applicants may have no experience of teaching in a higher education setting there are many opportunities to teach as a practising nurse in the clinical area. It may be wise to take advantage of such opportunities to develop a teaching profile, albeit limited.

When asked about skills and abilities, high on the agenda was a commitment to collaboration between practice and the educational arena followed by skills development. Both criteria are essential for the development of evidence-based practice and the reduction of the theory-practice gap. It is essential that potential lecturers become familiar with these issues and related key documents, as they are likely to be explored at the interview stage.

There does seem to be a general lack of consensus regarding the most sought-after characteristics for nurse lecturers, but the comments in Box 1 do offer a valuable insight into what individual employers want.

While some believe that it is essential for lecturers to have teaching experience already, others believe that it is the ‘ideal’. Two respondents acknowledged the difficulties in finding applicants with the correct balance of skills in education, research and practice.

A common theme is the need for lecturers to have research skills, experience and competence, thus demonstrating the gradual shift to research activity, publication and income generation.

### Conclusion

It is clear that four areas need to be considered when formulating a career plan for becoming a nurse lecturer. In no particular order, these are:

- Clinical competence;
- Teaching skills;
- Qualifications;
- Research.

With the lack of a national consensus on ‘person’ requirements it is essential that potential lecturers target the institutions of their choice to discover what each institution feels is necessary to succeed in the role. Once established, these needs and areas of development should be incorporated into a career plan with clearly defined targets. While working on these areas it may also be useful to contact the institutions again to check that their requirements have not changed.

### FIG 2. EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience Required</th>
<th>Essential (%)</th>
<th>Desirable (%)</th>
<th>Not Required (%)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience of Teaching in Higher Education</td>
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<td>57%</td>
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<td>Recent Clinical Experience</td>
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<td>31%</td>
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<td>Experience of Curriculum Planning</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience of Programme Delivery in Nursing Studies</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of Research Activity</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publication in Journals</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience of Team Leadership</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<td>Experience with Academic Assessment</td>
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<td>81.25%</td>
<td>6.25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience with Academic and Pastoral Support</td>
<td>Essential</td>
<td>Desirable</td>
<td>Not required</td>
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### FIG 3. SKILLS AND ABILITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills and Abilities</th>
<th>Essential (%)</th>
<th>Desirable (%)</th>
<th>Not Required (%)</th>
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</thead>
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<td>IT Skills</td>
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<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to Skills Development</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Committed to Collaboration Between Practice and Educational Arena</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to Work Within a Multidisciplinary Team</td>
<td>50%</td>
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### REFERENCES


