



## Issues concerning recruitment, retention and attrition of student nurses in the 1950/60s: A comparative study



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Accepted 6 July 2014

#### Keywords:

Historical cohort study  
Nursing student selection and dropout

### ABSTRACT

**Aim:** To investigate student nurse recruitment and attrition in the 1950' and 1960s and undertake comparisons to modern day concerns. The study was set in one hospital in the UK.

**Background:** In the period studied nursing was unpopular as a profession and there were difficulties surrounding recruitment. Attrition rates were high.

**Method:** Documentary analysis of 641 training records dating 1955 to 1968 was undertaken. Attrition rates, reasons for non-completion and employment following successful completion were determined. **Results:** Most recruits were young, unmarried, females and had overseas addresses. The majority ( $n = 88$ ) had prior nursing experience. Over 69% ( $n = 443$ ) successfully completed their training. Attrition rates were over 30% ( $n = 198$ ), the main reason being academic failure. Following completion over 40% ( $n = 183$ ) undertook midwifery training ( $n = 183$ ) or secured a staff nurse post ( $n = 153$ ).

**Conclusions:** Issues relating to recruitment, retention and attrition in the 1950s and 1960s put into context present day issues. Recent attrition rates from pre-registration nurse education have fallen, nevertheless some of the issues of yesteryear remain problematic. In the present study significant numbers of entrants left due to domestic and ill-health problems resonates with many modern day studies. Also failure to complete due to academic shortcomings continues to be a concern.

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### Introduction

This paper concerns a documentary analysis of student nurse records spanning from 1955 to 1968 who were undertaking State Registration Nurse (SRN) training. The study's purpose was to investigate student nurse recruitment and attrition in the 1950' and 1960s and compare to modern day concerns. Attrition in the context of this study is defined as non-completion of a training programme for whatever reason. It was thought the analysis would provide a local historical context to the nurse education provision delivered today by the University where the study was undertaken. Of more general practical value was the analysis would also help

give better understanding of the current issues pertaining to student nurse recruitment, retention and attrition both in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally.

Of relevance to the study was that recruitment and retention of nurses in the 1950s and 1960s was of national concern in the UK. Recruitment of student nurses was often poor. Attrition from nurse training in the 1950s and 1960s was also high. Main reasons for non-completion are identified by [Urwin et al. \(2010\)](#) as being such things as academic failure, leaving due to domestic problems and unsuitability for a career in nursing. Issues such as these remain of concern to nurse educators in modern times.

### Background

The training records analysed date from a time when apprenticeship models of nurse training was the custom. [Kirby \(2009\)](#) relates that apprenticeship systems had an emphasis on instilling obedience and discipline and nursing practice was characterised by rituals and routines that had been passed down from one generation of nurses to the next. [Baly \(1980\)](#) also describes how there was little theoretical content in nurse training programmes and most

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training took place on the wards where student nurses sometimes learnt in a 'sitting by nelly' way but more often simply by trial and error. [Goddard \(1953\)](#) in one of the first analysis of the work of nurses identifies that frequently hospitals were staffed by student nurses, so supervision of student nurses' clinical practice was minimal. Additionally [Baly \(1980\)](#) recounts that nursing research was in its infancy and an inquiring and questioning stance especially amongst student nurses was frowned upon. There were also vocational even religious attributes associated with those pursuing a nursing career.

The unpopularity of nursing as a profession and difficulties surrounding recruitment is reported by some authors. For example, [Baly \(1980\)](#) relates that in the early years following the introduction of the NHS (National Health Service) in 1948 there was a 'woeful shortage of nurses' (p319). The recruitment of British-born women was poor, as the young and single at the time were more interested in getting better paid jobs such as secretarial work or teaching. As a result in the 1950s the British government had a recruitment drive with a deliberate policy to attract qualified nurses and student nurses often from the former British colonies and particularly the West Indians ([Kramer, 2006](#)). There was also a considerable flow of Irish student nurses to England demonstrated in that 95% of the Irish Registered nurses in 1951 had trained in the UK ([Yeates, 2009](#)).

Attrition from nurse training in the 1950s and 1960s was also high. The term used at the time was 'wastage' ([Urwin et al., 2010](#)). Whilst many of the expressions used in this paper, such as for example, training instead of education, ward sister instead of ward manager is part of an aim to remain true to the conventions of the time, however, there is a deliberate intention not to use the term wastage. Whilst the term wastage was in common use its negative connotations of failure to complete being a waste of time and perhaps those not completing being a waste of time too, is seen as being unhelpful. As [Urwin et al. \(2010\)](#) relates education is rarely a complete waste of time as the processes that individuals go through to reach conclusions that they are not suitable for nursing is very often a valuable learning experience. Also use of the term wastage does not take into account the trauma, embarrassment and dent in self-esteem that individuals experience when they do not complete their programme ([Urwin et al. \(2010\)](#)).

Reasons for attrition from nurse training in the 1950s and 1960s are sometimes rather different than they are in present times. For example, marriage accounted for 13% of women who gave up training in the 1950 and 1960s and more men withdrew than women because of insufficient salary ([O'Dowd, 2008](#)). However, some reasons were similar to those experienced today. For example, withdrawals from training in the first year were most likely to be for educational reasons such as examination failure. Today academic failure continues to be a major reason of why students do not complete their programme ([Cameron et al., 2011](#)). Historically many withdrew because of the unsocial hours they were expected to work, poor accommodation and arbitrary and often petty regulations they were subjected to both on the wards and in their leisure time. As [Baly \(1980\)](#) reports there was also a constant conflict between the meeting the educational needs of student nurses and the staffing needs of the hospital. A situation that is sometimes reported by student nurses today ([Thomas et al., 2011](#)). Often the only support student nurses had at the time was that of their 'own set' or those in the same cohort. A similar scenario is described by [Roberts \(2009\)](#) in a study of present day pre-registration student nurses. The attitudes of ward sisters and their individual temperaments were often the causes of anxiety and stress. 'Good' ward sisters of the time could mean the difference between life and death of patients, whereas 'poor' sisters could result in very unpleasant and stressful clinical experiences for student nurses ([Reid, 1985](#)).

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics (n = 641).

Topic	Categories	Frequencies	Percentages
Year of entry	1955–1960	267	41.6%
	1961–1965	299	46.6%
	1965–1968	74	11.5%
	Missing data	1	
Age	Under 21 years	497	77.5%
	21–30 years	120	18.7%
	31–40 years	17	2.6%
	Over 41 years	4	0.6%
	Missing data	3	
Sex	Male	53	8.3%
	Female	688	91.7%
Marital status	Single	603	96.5%
	Married	21	3.4%
	Divorced	0	0%
	Widowed	1	0.2%
	Missing data	16	
Home address at entry	England (Merseyside)	245 (232)	38.3% (36.1%)
	Scotland	1	0.2%
	Northern Ireland	7	1.1%
	Wales	15	2.3%
	None UK	371	58.1%
Home address of non-UK recruits	Missing data	2	
	Eire	350	54.6%
	Caribbean	8	1.25%
	Nigeria	5	0.8%
	Mauritius	3	0.5%
	Cameroon	1	0.2%
	Ghana	1	0.2%

It may be concluded from this albeit brief overview of recruitment, retention and attrition issues, whilst there are some similarities in issues that face nurse educationists today and their colleagues of nearly 60 years, there are also differences. Often these relate to differences in the wider social world and healthcare environments of the time. It is with this as a backdrop that analysis of the nurse training records was undertaken.

## Methods

The purpose of the study was to investigate student nurse recruitment and attrition in the 1950' and 1960s and compare to modern day problems.

The study objectives were to:

1. Investigate the characteristics of student nurses recruited in the 1950s and 1960s to a large acute hospital in the Liverpool area of the North West of England.
2. Identify reasons why student nurses left their training programmes early.
3. Examine what the first employment of nurses was when they had qualified.
4. Compare the findings of the training records analysis with current national and international literature on the subject area.

## Design

In essence the study was a documentary analysis of some historical records. That is three large files of nurse training records dated from 1955 to 1968 containing 641 individual records were available for analysis. Analysis of the data took place in 2013.

## Data extraction

The records were in good condition and contained mostly individual hand written accounts of a student nurse's entry details

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