

Towards a values-based person specification for recruitment of compassionate nursing and midwifery candidates: A study of registered and student nurses' and midwives' perceptions of prerequisite attributes and key skills



Anne Waugh ^{a,*}, Dave Smith ^{a,1}, Dorothy Horsburgh ^{b,2}, Morag Gray ^{b,3}

^a School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Care, Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill Campus, Edinburgh, EH11 4BN, UK

^b Faculty of Health, Life and Social Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill Campus, Edinburgh, EH11 4BN, UK

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SUMMARY

Selection and retention of preregistration nursing and midwifery students are issues that exercise educators, universities and commissioning bodies both nationally and internationally. It has recently become an expectation that a values-based approach is used within recruitment and selection activities in the UK. The desirability of a person specification to support transparent recruitment and selection is well recognised.

An online survey of registered and student nurses and midwives found consensus around the desirability of several personal attributes and key skills. There was consensus in the top seven ranked attributes which were honesty and trustworthiness, communication skills, being a good listener, patience and tactfulness, sensitivity and compassion, the ability to seek and act on guidance and being a good team worker; this was between registered and unregistered nurses and midwives and also between participants representing all fields of nursing and midwifery practice. Some of the responses from Practice Education Facilitators (PEFs) ($n = 5$) and senior managers ($n = 15$) differed from those of other registrants surveyed. The attribute 'Able to draw on knowledge and experience' was considered more important by PEFs and 'Observant and able to act on your own initiative within your level of responsibility' and 'Able to draw on knowledge and experience' were ranked more highly by senior managers.

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Introduction

This study emerged from the first phase of action research within the Leadership in Compassionate Care Programme (LCCP; [Edinburgh Napier University and NHS Lothian, 2012](#)). The project vision was to embed compassionate care as an integral aspect of nursing and midwifery practice in NHS Lothian and beyond. The project encompassed four strands that focused on different stages of professional practice; to embed the principles of compassionate care in the undergraduate curricula, to support newly qualified registrants during their first year of practice, to establish centres of excellence in NHS Lothian–Beacon Wards—and to support development of leadership skills in compassionate care. This undergraduate curriculum study related to the first strand and set out to consider which values-based attributes and key skills were most important in recruitment and selection of compassionate

students. The first step was to find a person specification, which would assist candidates to self-select their career against essential and desirable criteria. A person specification would also facilitate fair, transparent and consistent selection of suitable candidates.

Background/Literature

It is clear that academic qualifications are one determinant of success in nursing and midwifery but it is also clear that this criterion, on its own, is insufficient. For some time, UK governments have indicated the need for a person specification for nursing and midwifery candidates. The Department of Health ([DoH, 2006](#)) recommended that selection of candidates uses an evidence-based person specification that reflects factors linked to likelihood of completion. NHS Education for Scotland ([NES, 2010](#)) and the [Scottish Government Health Directorates and NES \(2010\)](#) both state that a person specification would be highly desirable although the former notes that this would require consensus about qualities that make good nurses and midwives. More recently, [DoH \(2012a, p.22\)](#) recommends that 'values based recruitment is included in the national standard contract for pre-registration education programmes'. A literature search

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 131 455 5650; fax: +44 131 455 5631.

E-mail addresses: a.waugh@napier.ac.uk (A. Waugh), d.smith@napier.ac.uk (D. Smith), d.horsburgh@napier.ac.uk (D. Horsburgh), m.gray@napier.ac.uk (M. Gray).

¹ Tel.: +44 131 455 5644; fax: +44 131 455 5631.

² Tel.: +44 131 455 5628; fax: +44 131 455 5631.

³ Tel.: +44 131 455 5302; fax: +44 131 455 5631.

was therefore carried out to identify characteristics or attributes for inclusion in a person specification.

Initially literature around student retention was explored; however, this revealed many reasons for attrition rather than those which facilitate retention or successful completion. Regarding the widely used term 'attrition', its definition and calculation are not consistent across the UK (Unwin et al., 2010; Cameron et al., 2011). A literature review by Unwin et al. (2010) and an integrative review by Cameron et al. (2011) explored the factors involved and cite many relevant studies in detail. Unwin et al. (2010) concluded that factors that may assist with retention are neither the absence nor the opposite of those that may contribute to attrition. There is however consensus that both retention and attrition of nursing and midwifery students are complex multifactorial issues.

The academic literature showed a paucity of information relevant to personal attributes and skills for recruitment and selection of compassionate nursing and midwifery candidates. The university websites for all Scottish nursing and midwifery programmes and a selection of similar English programmes were searched without finding definitive profiles of desired personal attributes. Moreover, only two careers websites that included personal attributes were identified (PlanIT Plus, 2012; NHS Careers, 2012). Finally, a Google search for 'person specifications', 'entry profiles/requirements' for 'student nurses/midwives' and also 'candidates/applicants', revealed only one exemplar. In summary, neither the literature nor alternative search strategies revealed desirable personal attributes or key skills that could be used to underpin a person specification for recruitment and selection of suitable candidates. This area therefore required further exploration. The aim of this study within the overall action research programme was to devise a bespoke University person specification for nursing and midwifery candidates.

Aim of the Present Study

This study aimed to identify registered and student nurses' and midwives' perceptions of potential attributes and key skills to include in a person specification for nursing and midwifery candidates. The values-based attributes and key skills found on the single person specification and two careers websites PlanIT Plus (2012) and NHS Careers (2012) were collated and carefully reviewed by the project team which included representation from midwifery and all fields of nursing practice (namely adult, mental health, child and learning disability nursing). The list was refined by deleting duplicated characteristics and further as more detailed exploration of the values-based attributes allowed consensus to be reached across midwifery and the fields of nursing about different ways of expressing the same characteristics (Fig. 1). The final list of values-based attributes and key skills used in the survey is shown in Table 1; some of the key skills are also Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2010) entry requirements. Specifically the survey set out to identify the relative importance of each key skill and attribute to participants representing midwifery and all fields of nursing practice. The primary objective was to compare responses of students and registrants in order to identify differences in the perceived importance of attributes and skills between participants new to their profession and others who were more experienced.

Secondly, the study aimed to show how the role of registered practitioners might affect their perception of the relative importance of the defined attributes and skills. The study was also designed to identify differences in the perceived importance of attributes between different fields of practice in order that a person specification could be tailored to meet such findings if required.

Design and Sample

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval of the survey and accompanying participant information sheet were granted by Edinburgh Napier University's Faculty

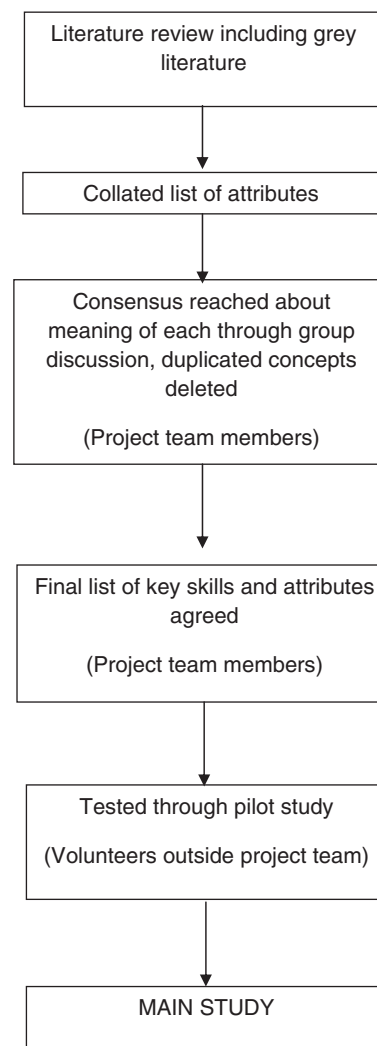


Fig. 1. Flowchart showing how values-based attributes and key skills used in the survey were identified.

Research and Ethics Governance Committee. Review was then sought from NHS Lothian Research Ethics Service who classified the study as service evaluation which, following registration with NHS Lothian Quality Improvement Programme, did not require further approval and the survey could proceed. Potential participants were informed in writing that by undertaking the online survey they were providing their implied consent to participate. The survey did not collect personal data and responses were anonymous.

Data Collection and Sample

The two research questions were:

- Are there any differences in the perceived importance of attributes and skills between participants new to their profession and others who are more experienced?
- Are there any similarities or differences in the perceived importance of attributes and skills between participants representing the four fields of nursing practice and midwifery?

The survey was designed to be easy to complete and so maximise response rates; it was divided into two sections. The first set of questions provided information regarding participants' roles and fields of practice. In section two, participants were asked to rate the perceived importance of 23 attributes and key skills (Table 1) using a five-point Likert scale selecting a response from: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree

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