



Less is not more Fewer nurses being trained

Nursing a transition

Deep cuts in provincial budgets and the restructuring of the higher education system has resulted in a critical shortage of nurses. Public training in the profession has declined substantially in recent years.

A major new study by the Human Sciences Research Council has found that budget cuts have halted many public hospital training programmes, while restructuring led to the closing or merger of public nursing colleges.

With an increasing emphasis on the university nursing degree rather than the four-year college diploma, college output has dropped while university output has increased slowly, but from a low base.

Between 1997 and 2007, the annual production of professional nurses overall increased by 19% as a result of the doubling of the output from bridging programmes (from 1 033 to 2 093 over the period).

At the same time the output of professional nurses through four-year

college and university courses fell by 13% — from 2 682 in 1997 to 2 342 in 2007.

Apparently most of the bridging training has occurred in the public sector but the numbers declined from 1 381 in 1998 to 1 261 in 2007, while private-sector output increased more than fivefold, from 158 to 832.

The contribution of public colleges to the production of professional nurses declined from 62% to 37% of the total output, while university output rose from 10% to 16%, and output from the bridging programme increased from 28% to 47%.

The study suggests the private sector is now playing a much larger — and often lucrative — role in the production of nurses.

The major hospital groups, in response to their own severe shortage of nurses and to accusations that they poach from the public sector, expanded their own training programmes, producing increasing numbers of nurses to meet their own specific needs. At the same time, small private colleges have mushroomed.

The study urges government to play a greater role in the training of nurses, and suggests that the “new emphasis on a professional nursing degree as the qualification of choice should not be at the cost of deterring young people who would make excellent professional nurses but do not meet the academic criteria for university study, or who see the university degree as too theoretical”.

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