District nurse student numbers on the up

Earlier this summer, the QNI repeated a study it first carried out last year measuring the number of district nursing specialist practitioner programmes (SPQ) being offered by UK universities, and the number of district nurses qualifying this summer.

The research was first carried out following concerns that the number of new district nurses was falling far short of the number needed to replace those leaving the workforce. The QNI, therefore, wanted to determine if the situation had improved or worsened in the last 12 months. The good news is, the number of courses being offered and the number of newly-qualified district nurses both increased significantly. Last year we did not include Scotland in the research, as the QNI does not operate there. However, this year we contacted Scottish universities too, giving a whole UK picture as far as this is possible.

Key points from the new research showed that:

- There are 351 district nurses due to qualify in the summer of 2014, compared to 254 in 2013 — an increase of 38% (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland)
- There were 427 new entrants to the district nurse programme in 2013/14 in the UK (including Scotland), of which 30% are registered on the part-time route
- In 2013/14 there was a 25% increase in universities running ‘specialist practice – district nurse’ programmes in England, compared to 2012/13
- Compared to 2012/13, there was a 31% increase in programmes running in 2013/14, with 11 or more students in each cohort.

The data presented a number of challenges. Because there are many part-time students, and because some cohorts start in January or February, as well as in September, there are nurses at varying stages of their district nursing education within the system at any one time. This means that it can be difficult to predict how many will graduate in any given year.

It is hoped that as the QNI repeats the research year-on-year, and gains accurate entry and exit numbers from district nursing courses, it will be able to build up a better picture of the evolving workforce pattern.

The figures obtained last year served as a wake-up call to commissioners and educators. At that point, many courses had so few students that their viability could be called into question, and in 2012/13 21% of universities approved by the NMC to offer the district nurse programme did not run the course at all. It was clear that the number of new nurses being trained was nowhere near the ‘replacement level’ needed to keep the district nursing workforce at a steady number.

The new figures are, therefore, encouraging but not yet sufficient. In London, for instance, only five district nurses qualified in the summer of 2013, which is an incredibly low figure in a city of eight million people. The figure has risen to 25 in the current year — an improvement, but still nowhere near the number actually required.

An increase in the number of nurses taking the SPQ is also only part of the picture — suitable employment opportunities must also exist.

The QNI and QNI Scotland are working in partnership with key stakeholders to develop new standards for district nurse education and practice, which should be completed in September 2015. It is hoped that this work will show the way forward for district nurse education and put district nurses back at the vanguard of the community nursing workforce.

Crystal Oldman is chief executive of the Queen’s Nursing Institute (QNI).