



Royal College  
of Nursing

# Nursing our future

*An RCN study into the challenges facing today's  
nursing students in the UK*

## **Nursing our future**

### ***An RCN study into the challenges facing today's nursing students in the UK***

**Royal College of Nursing**

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## Summary of Key Findings

Today's nursing students face many challenges – which may be financial, personal or relate to their studies. This survey, by the Royal College of Nursing, aims to uncover the realities of being a nursing student by reporting students' own experiences. Over 4,500 nursing students across the UK responded to an online survey between August and October 2008.

- Nursing students are from across all age groups reflecting that many people now change jobs during their 30s and 40s. Half of nursing students (47%) responding to the survey were over 30, including 17% who were between 35 and 40, and 19% who were over 40 years.
- Rather than entering nursing straight from school or college, two thirds (65%) were in paid employment before starting their nursing course. While this includes 21% who were in paid NHS employment, four in ten (40%) were in other paid employment before starting their nursing course, demonstrating the number of students who have started nursing after another career.
- Four in ten (44%) nursing students responding to the survey had considered leaving their nursing course.
- Higher education institutions can direct support to students at risk of leaving – but only if they are aware who is considering leaving. Three quarters of those who had considered leaving (74%) reported that their personal tutor at university was not aware that they were considering leaving their course.
- By far the most common reason for considering leaving was for financial reasons (62%) with students reporting financial debts from less than £1500 to more than £10,000.
- Four in ten (39%) of those who had considered leaving reported that their experience on a clinical placement had been a factor. This highlights the importance of quality clinical placements, with effective communication, support and mentorship. Many students commented on travel with one in seven (15%)

reporting that too much travel had contributed to them considering leaving their course.

- Other reasons that had contributed to students considering leaving their course included personal problems (26%), doubts over nursing as a career (24%), childcare difficulties (19%), and insufficient support from a university tutor (21%).
- Of those who had considered leaving, 85% reported that the reason they stayed was that they wanted to finish their course – demonstrating their commitment to continue their nursing career despite financial and other problems.
- Support from family and friends was important, with 63% reporting that this helped them decide to stay in nursing. Other reasons included starting paid work to help financially (25%), support from a university tutor (15%), and making other childcare arrangements (4%).
- The majority of nursing students will be undertaking paid work this autumn (89%), continue to work whilst on clinical placement (73%), and have been in paid work throughout their nursing studies (71%).
- Eight in ten (83%) students who will be working this term will be working as a health care support worker. Other paid work includes bar work or jobs in retail.
- Nursing students reported working up to 30 or more hours a week in their paid job, with a third working up to 10 hours (37%), four in ten working between 11 and 19 hours (42%) and 15% working between 20 and 24 hours a week. The hours per week that students are spending either in formal study and paid work is high.
- Nearly three quarters (73%) of nursing students reported that the money they earn helps them to stay on their course
- Paid work is impacting on nursing students' studies. Two thirds (63%) report that they have less time to study; with nearly one third reporting that working has a detrimental effect on their studies (30%). Half report that the impact of paid work

is that they have to be more focused in the time they have available to study (50%).

- Two thirds of nursing students responding to the survey finance their studies through a non means-tested bursary (64%), and 25% reported having a means-tested bursary. Other ways nursing students finance their courses apart from additional paid work include three in ten receiving financial support from their partner or family (27%), other allowances, and by taking on debt including overdraft, credit cards, and loans.
- Six in ten reported having an overdraft (62%), and half reported credit card debt (51%). Many students reported having loans, including a third with a student loan (33%), loans from family (38%), bank loans (29%) and from friends (9%).
- Three quarters of nursing students responding to the survey reported that they thought they would finish their nursing studies with debt (excluding any mortgages) (75%).
- Students proposed a range of factors that they would find supportive including support from universities, childcare and financial support. Students also valued support from the RCN.
- 86% of students reported that an online tutor service would be helpful while 82% said that additional tuition would be valuable. 72% reported that they would find a helpline at university useful for example to enable telephone contact while on clinical placement. Peer support was also valued; with 64% reporting a buddy service would provide useful support.
- Counselling services were seen as useful by two thirds of nursing students responding to the survey (67%). Half (50%), reported that child care places/facilities would be of support a majority of 88% reported that they would find financial services helpful.
- The RCN offers nursing students a variety of direct support and information, plus access to peer support via the network of Student Information Officers. The majority of students reported they would find RCN support helpful including

RCN library and information services (94%), the RCN Learning Zone (92%), the RCN website (93%), and support from a Student Information Officer (83%).

- Nursing students have high levels of motivation to complete their courses and become registered nurses, including among those who have considered leaving.
- When asked about their views on finding a post when qualifying, half (52%) were confident of finding a full-time permanent post on qualifying, including 14% who were very confident. One third were not sure of their chances of securing a full-time permanent post (33%), while 15% were not confident or not at all confident.

## **1. Introduction**

Today's nursing students face many challenges – which may be financial, personal or relate to their studies. This survey, by the Royal College of Nursing, reporting students' own experiences aims to uncover the realities of being a nursing student in the UK.

## **2. Context**

Across the UK in all four countries, attention is focusing on the nursing student experience.

In England as part of the Darzi review it was recommended that there should be a full review of the support offered to healthcare students. A working group has been set up to progress this work and the RCN, along with several other healthcare unions, are represented on this group.

In Northern Ireland, the Health Minister launched a campaign in November 2007, supported by the universities and RCN, with the aim of encouraging applications for mental health or learning disability nursing from people setting out on their careers, or those wanting to change careers. The Northern Ireland government had recognised a concern over attrition rates and a shortage of both mental health and learning disability nurses, with universities reporting low application numbers to these branches of nursing.

In Scotland, within a context of reduced student intakes and increased attrition the Student Recruitment and Retention Delivery Group was established in 2008 by the Scottish Government with the remit to take forward a programme of activity to improve recruitment, retention and the student experience. The RCN and other healthcare unions are represented on this group. This activity is being funded by £5 million over two years which was released when the pre-registration intake was reduced in 2008/9 by 225 places to 3060 places.

The last few years have seen fluctuating numbers of places for pre-registration nursing students in Wales. Two years ago the Welsh Assembly Government took the decision to cut the number of training places for nurses and other health professionals,

with Wales training over 220 fewer nurses in 2007/8. However in 2008 the number of places was increased from 1,079 to 1,093, with an extra 180 return to practice courses over the next three years..

### 3. Method

An online survey was prepared and then publicised from August 2008 on the RCN student pages of the RCN website, by email and through networks, including the peer network of RCN Student Information Officers. By the closing date in October, over 4500 nursing students across the UK had responded (Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1 Respondents by country**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>% of total</i>
England	3527	78
Northern Ireland	262	6
Scotland	517	12
Wales	190	4
<i>Country not recorded</i>	51	-
<i>Total</i>	<i>4547</i>	<i>100</i>

### 4. Profile of Nursing Students

This section describes the demographic profile of nursing students across the UK who responded to the survey. This includes the gender and age profile and their background prior to starting their nursing course.

#### 4.1 Gender

Nine in ten (89%) nursing students were female and 11% were male. This is directly comparable with the gender split on the Nursing and Midwifery Council register<sup>1</sup>.

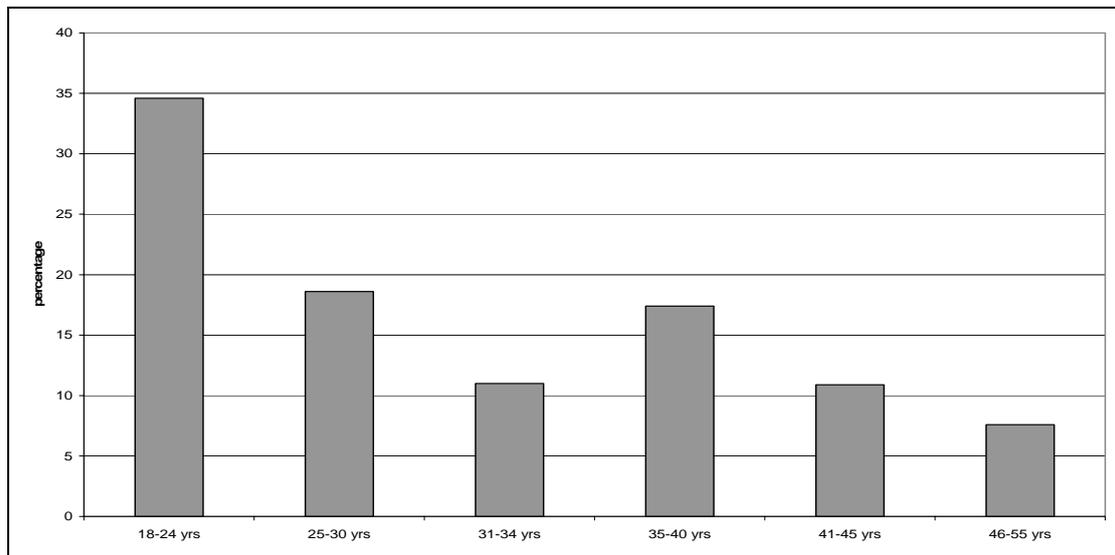
#### 4.2 Age Profile

Nursing students are now from across all age groups reflecting that many people now change jobs during their 30s and 40s (Figure 4.1). A third of nursing students across the UK (35%) were aged between 18 and 24 years, with a fifth (18%) aged between 25 and 30 years. Half of nursing students (47%) responding to the survey were over 30 including 17% who were between 35 and 40, and 19% who were over 40 years.

<sup>1</sup> Nursing and Midwifery Council (2007) *Statistical analysis of the register 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007*

The age span of nursing students demonstrates the wide range of people being attracted to a nursing career, and the diversity of life and work experience that are now brought to nursing. The average age of a nurse in the UK is now 42 with the age profile growing steadily older over the last 20 years<sup>2</sup>.

**Figure 4.1: Age Profile of Nursing Students UK (percentages)**



The age profile serves to highlight the range of flexible support that students with different life experiences, family and financial commitments may require to enable them to stay in nursing. This also indicates that many nursing students will experience a shorter working life as a nurse than in previous generations. This has implications both for workforce planning and for nurses' careers.

### 4.3 Degree or diploma?

Two thirds of nursing students (62%) across the UK were on a diploma programme and 38% were undertaking a degree. This varied across the UK from Wales which only offers degree courses to a mix in the other three countries.

One fifth (20%) of nursing students across the UK were in their first year, 36% were in second year, 32% were in third year, and 1% were in their fourth year of study. 11% of nursing students reported they would complete their course by the term

<sup>2</sup> Ball, J and Pike, G (2007)  *Holding On* Results from the 2007 RCN Employment Survey, RCN, London

starting in autumn 2008.

The majority were studying adult nursing (73%), with 14% studying mental health, 11% studying children’s nursing, 2% studying learning disabilities nursing, and 1% studying midwifery.

#### 4.4 Before nursing

Rather than entering nursing straight from school or college, two thirds (65%) were in paid employment before starting their nursing course. This includes 21% who were in paid NHS employment – as a health care assistant/auxiliary or support worker, and 4% who were in other paid NHS employment (Figure 4.2).

Four in ten (40%) were in other paid employment before starting their nursing course demonstrating the number of students who have started nursing after another career.

One fifth (21%) were at college prior to starting their nursing course. 9% were at school. Other nursing students were undertaking full time child care or other caring responsibilities or were receiving benefits before starting their course.

**Figure 4.2 What were you doing before you started your nursing course?**

	UK	
	%	number
Other paid employment	40	1694
Paid NHS employment - HCSW	21	889
Other paid NHS employment	4	188
Student at college	21	902
Student at school	9	399
Full time child care	3	135
Other caring responsibilities	4	152
Receiving benefits	2	99

## 5. Intentions to leave their nursing course

### 5.1 Have you ever considered leaving?

Given the current levels of attrition across the UK, the survey sought to address how many students may have considered not completing their studies. Four in ten (44%) of nursing students responding to the survey had considered leaving their nursing course.

When a student is considering leaving, they could be regarded as ‘at risk’. Higher education institutions can direct support to at risk students – but only if they are aware who is considering leaving.

Three quarters of those who had considered leaving their course (74%) reported that their personal tutor at university was not aware that they were considering leaving.

There is value in systems that enable the identification and then targeted support for those students most at risk of leaving their course. The Scottish Government and higher education institutions are currently exploring the wider use of such systems. If many students do not inform their tutor that they may leave, it will not be apparent to teaching staff that many students may be at risk of leaving. This is of particular concern given the range of reasons given by students as to why they had considered leaving – many of which are not related to their experience of study or academic performance.

## **5.2 Why might students leave their course?**

Respondents to the survey, who reported that they had considered leaving their course, were asked the reasons that had contributed to this view (Figure 5.1).

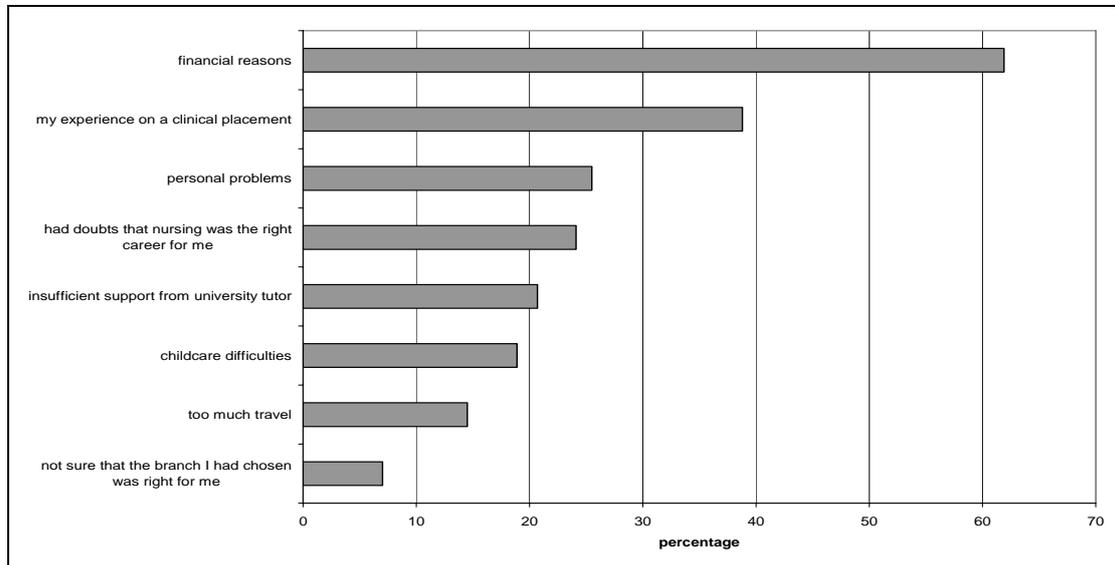
By far the most common was for financial reasons (62%). This links closely with students’ experience of paid work during their studies which is reported in section 6.

With so many nursing students undertaking paid work during their course, it is not surprising that financial reasons are so prominent. With many nursing students in debt, the question of a liveable bursary is raised. A higher bursary could reduce the numbers who would consider leaving for financial reasons and reduce the numbers in additional paid work.

Those who had considered leaving for financial reasons reported financial debts from £1500 to more than £10,000. 40% of nursing students responding to the survey reported that debt of between £1500 and £2999 had prompted them to consider

leaving, and 37% reported that when considering leaving for financial reasons, their level of debt was more than £3000.

**Figure 5.1 Reasons why nursing students consider leaving their course**



Clinical placements had a key role. Four in ten (39%) of those who had considered leaving reported that their experience on a clinical placement had been a factor. This highlights the importance of quality clinical placements, with support and mentorship. The role of effective communication between student, tutor and those at the clinical placement is vital.

Many students commented on the travel associated with clinical placements. 15% reported that too much travel had contributed to them considering leaving their nursing course.

Support from a personal tutor is vital. One fifth (21%) of those who had considered leaving reported that insufficient support from a university tutor had been a reason for this view.

Students' personal circumstances also play a part in their career decisions. 26% reported that personal problems had been a reason for them considering leaving their course. One fifth (19%) of those who thought about leaving reported that childcare difficulties had been a main reason.

Doubts over nursing as a career were reported by a minority of nursing students. One quarter (24%) reported that doubts over whether nursing was the right career for them had contributed to them considering leaving their course. 7% reported that they had not been sure that the branch they had chosen was right for them.

**Figure 5.2 Reasons students considered leaving their course, UK**

	UK	
	%	<i>number</i>
Financial reasons	62	1213
My experience on a clinical placement	39	760
Personal problems	26	500
Had doubts that nursing was the right career for me	24	473
Childcare difficulties	19	371
Insufficient support from university tutor	21	405
Too much travel	15	285
Not sure that the branch I had chosen was right for me	7	138

### 5.2 So why did they stay

Although many nursing students may have at one time considered leaving their course, there is a strong commitment to complete their studies coupled with a range of support that has enabled them to stay in nursing.

Of those who had considered leaving, 85% reported that the reason they stayed was that they wanted to finish their course – demonstrating their commitment to continuing their nursing career despite financial and other problems.

This may reflect the fact that many of those who had made the active life decision to leave a previous job to go into nurse training are highly motivated to become a registered nurse.

Support from family and friends was important, with 63% reporting that this helped them decide to stay in nursing. 4% reported that making other childcare arrangements helped them decide to stay on their course.

For one quarter (25%) of those who had considered leaving, starting paid work which had helped financially had contributed to enabling them to stay in nursing.

15% reported that support from their tutor at university had helped them decide to stay on their course, and a small number had changed branch and stayed in nursing. This demonstrates that support from higher education institutions via tutors can result in students staying on their course.

For many students it was a combination of reasons that helped them decide to stay on their course (Figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.2 Factors enabling students to stay on their course, UK**

	UK	
	%	number
I want to finish my course	85	1647
Support from friends/family	63	1218
Started additional paid work - helps financially	25	481
Support from my tutor	15	289
Made different childcare arrangements	4	77
I changed branch and stayed in nursing	2	30

## 6. Working while studying

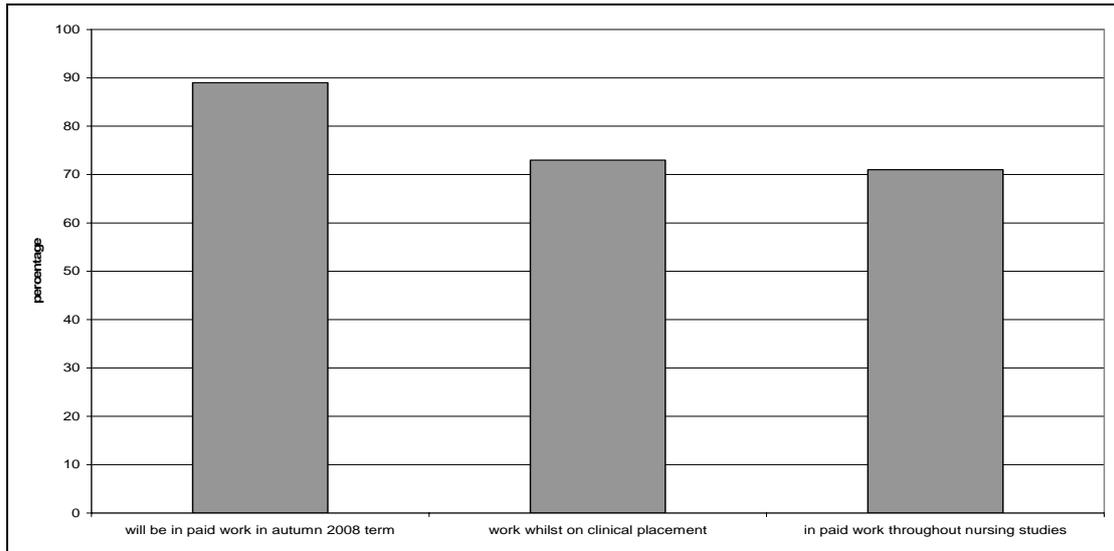
### 6.1 Extent of additional paid work

This survey has provided the opportunity to find out from nursing students the extent of additional paid work they are undertaking.

89% of nursing students reported that they would be in paid work during the term starting this autumn 2008. While some students will be working during term breaks, the majority are working throughout their student life. 73% of nursing students reported that they work whilst on clinical placement (Figure 6.1)

Nearly three quarters (71%) of nursing students responding to the survey reported that they had been in paid work throughout their nursing studies.

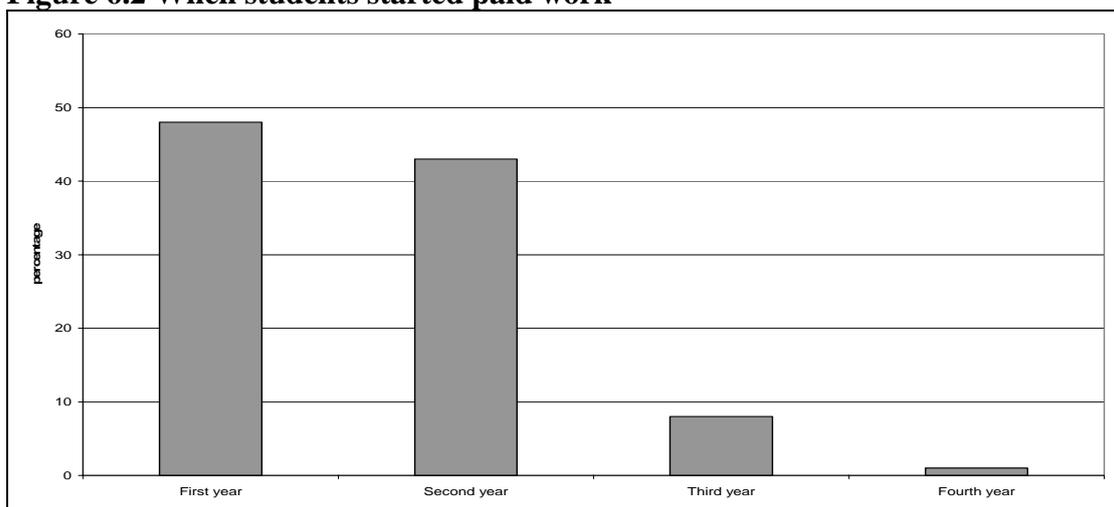
**Figure 6.1 Experiences of paid work whilst a nursing student, UK**



## 6.2 When did they start work?

Nursing students start undertaking paid work at different stages of student life. Of those students who had not been in paid work as they started their nursing studies, half (48%) had started paid work during their first year of study, with 43% starting paid work in second year, and 9% in third year (Figure 6.2). This implies that although many students started their studies without also undertaking paid work, many quickly began paid employment to supplement their income.

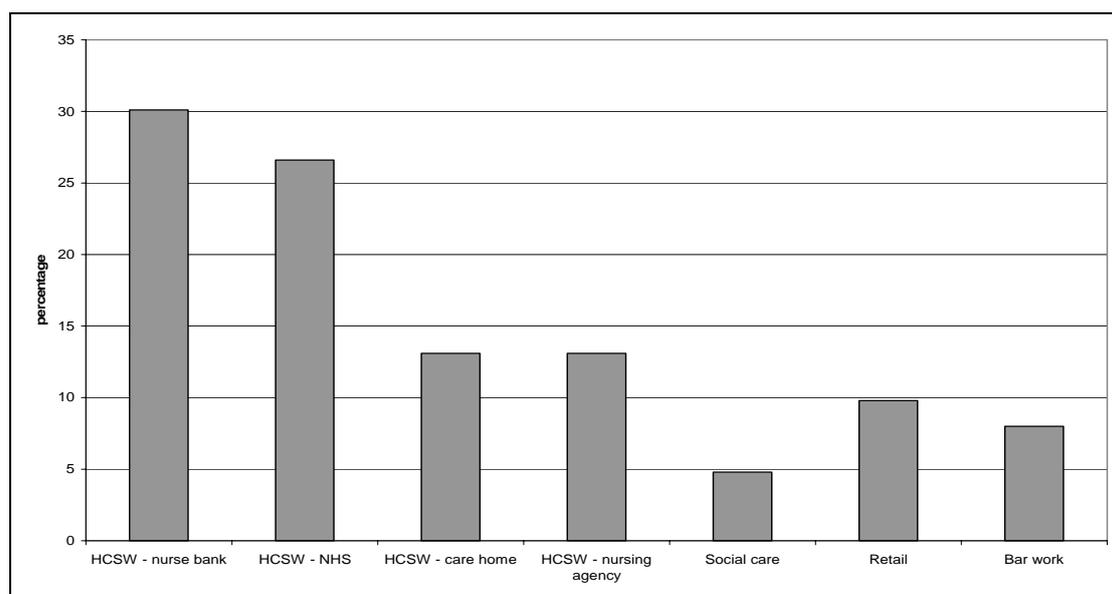
**Figure 6.2 When students started paid work**



### 6.3 What type of job?

Of those students who will be in paid work during term time in autumn 2008, the majority (83%) will be working as a health care support worker – one third on a nurse bank (30%), one fifth in the NHS (27%), 13% in a care home, and 13% for a nursing agency. Students are also undertaking bar work (8%) or jobs in retail (10%) (Figure 6.3).

**Figure 6.3 What type of job nursing students will be doing in autumn term 2008**



### 6.4 How many hours?

Nursing students reported working up to 30 or more hours a week in their paid job, with four in ten (37%) working up to 10 hours, four in ten (42%) working between 11 and 19 hours and 15% working between 20 and 24 hours a week.

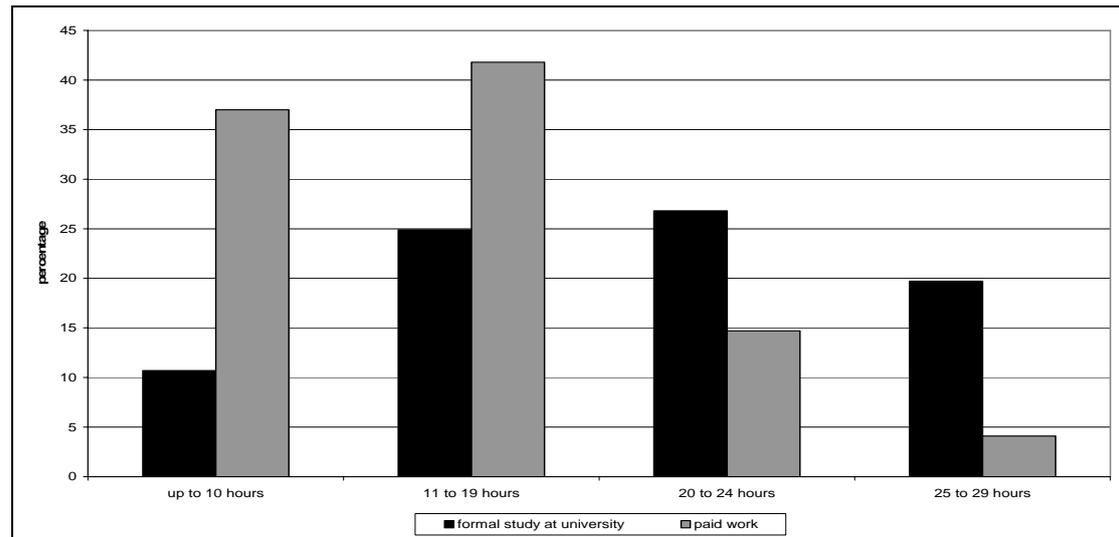
One quarter (25%) of nursing students are spending on average 11 to 19 hours a week on lectures/tutorials/formal study at university while 27% are spending 20 to 24 hours a week, 20% are spending 25 to 29 hours a week, and 18% are spending 30 or more hours per week. With the high numbers also undertaking paid work, the hours per week that students are spending either in formal study and paid work is high.

Figure 6.4 shows how many hours a week on average nursing students are spending in lectures/tutorials/formal study at university, and how many hours a week on average

they are spending in paid work.

Nursing students are undertaking paid work to supplement their income. Just under three quarters of nursing students responding to the survey reported that the money they earn helps them to stay on their course (73%).

**Figure 6.4 Average hours a week in formal study and paid work, UK**



### 6.5 Impact of paid work on studies

However, paid work is impacting on nursing students' studies. Two thirds (63%) report that they have less time to study; with nearly one third (30%) reporting that working detrimentally affects their studies. Half (50%) report that the impact of paid work is that they have to be more focused in the time they have available to study. Only 10% reported that the paid work they undertake has no impact on their study (Figure 6.5).

**Figure 6.5 Impact of paid work on studies, UK**

	UK	
	%	number
I have less time to study	63	1558
The money I earn helps me stay on my course	73	1786
I have to be more focused time in time available to study	50	1228
Working detrimentally affects my studies	30	746
There is no impact on my study	10	249

## 7. Student Finance

### 7.1 How students finance their course

Two thirds of nursing students (64%) finance their studies through a non means-tested bursary, and 25% reported having a means-tested bursary (Figure 7.1).

Other ways nursing students finance their courses apart from additional paid work include receiving financial support from their partner or family (27%), other allowances, and by taking on debt.

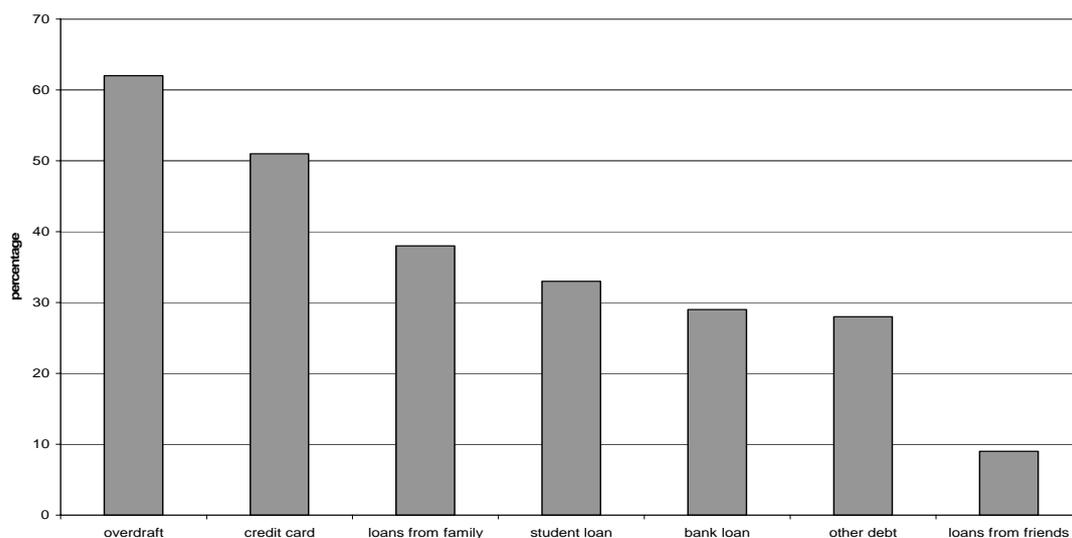
**Figure 7.1 How nursing students finance their study – excluding paid work**

	UK	
	%	number
Non means tested bursary	64	2738
Financial support from partner/family	27	1145
Means tested bursary	25	1068
Other allowances	4	169
Access fund	3	125
NHS hardship grant	1	45
Other	13	557

### 7.2 Levels of debt

Nursing students reported varying levels of debt, with many having a variety of debts including overdraft, credit cards, and loans (Figure 7.2).

**Figure 7.2 Types of debt (excluding mortgage)**

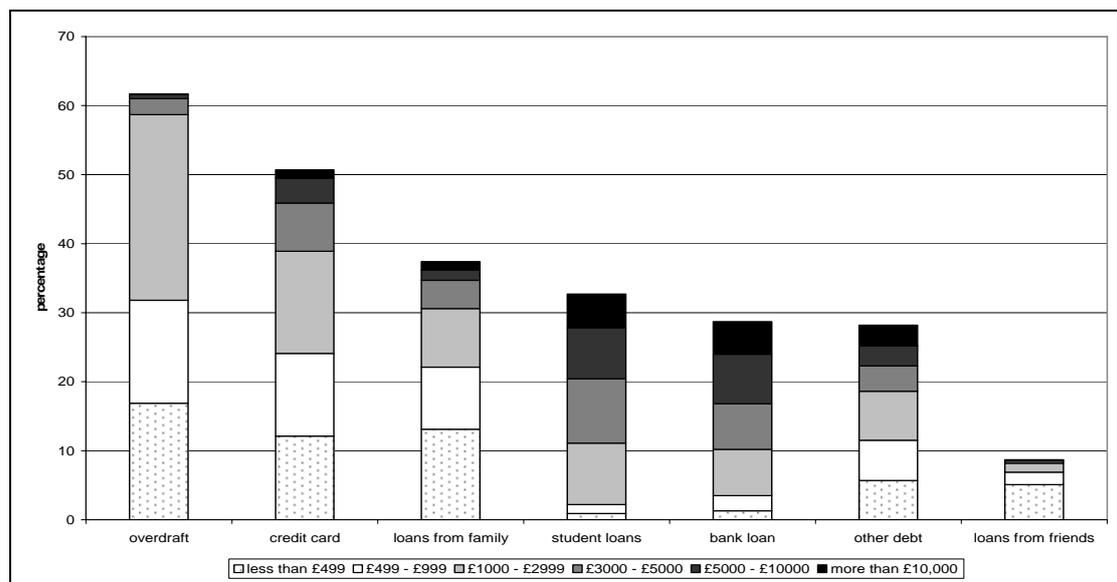


Six in ten (62%) reported having an overdraft, including 17% with an overdraft of under £499, 15% with an overdraft of between £500 and £999, and 27% with an overdraft of between £1000 and £2999 (Figure 7.3).

Half reported credit card debt (51%), including 12% with debt of under £499, 12% with debt between £500 and £999, and 15% with credit card debt between £1000 and £2999.

Many students reported having loans, including a third with a student loan (33%), ranging from under £499 to more than £10,000. Other loans included loans from family (38%), the bank (29%) and from friends (9%).

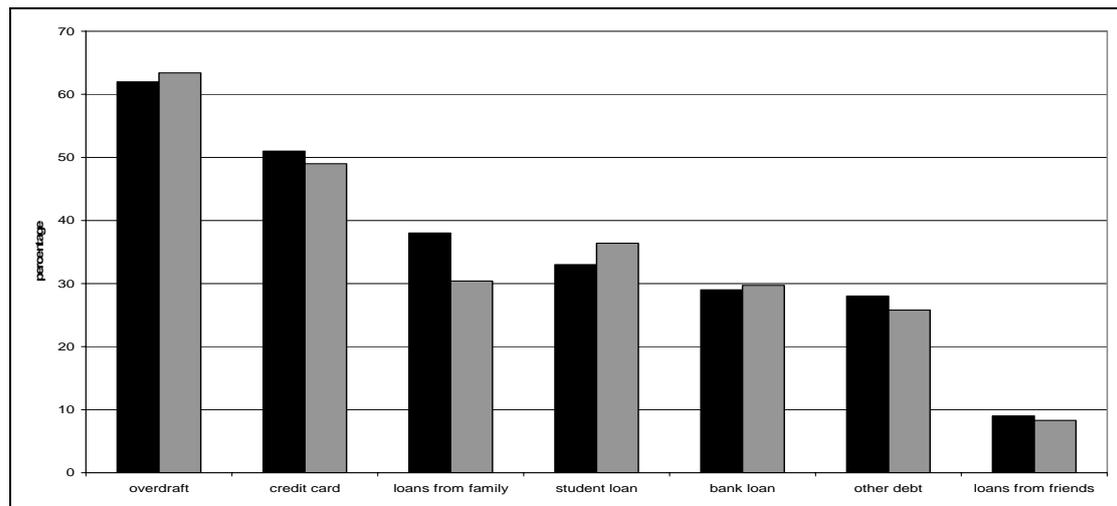
**Figure 7.3 Amount of debt, nursing students in UK**



Three quarters (75%) of nursing students responding to the survey reported that they thought they would finish their nursing studies with debt (excluding any mortgages).

Figure 7.4 shows the type of debt students expect to have at the end of their studies compared with their current debts.

**Figure 7.4 Current debt and expected type of debt at end of course, UK**



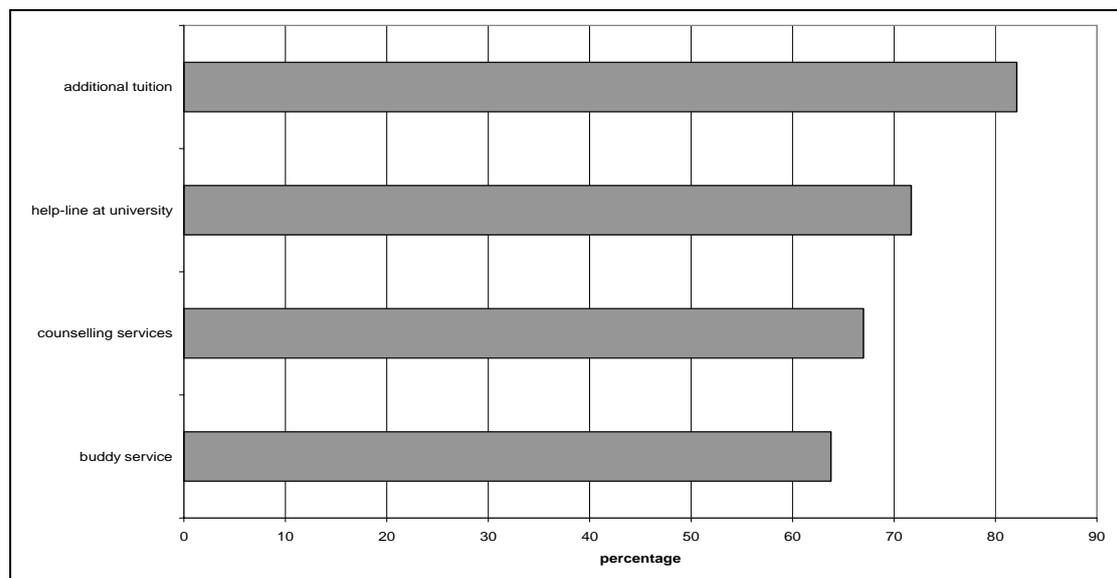
Key  = current debt  = expected debt

### 8.1 Support from universities

The role universities can play in supporting students seems to be key. (Figure 8.1). Nursing students across the UK held similar views as to the support they would find helpful. 86% of students reported that an on line tutor service would be helpful, while 82% said that additional tuition would be valuable.

72% reported that they would find a helpline at university useful for example to enable telephone contact while on clinical placement. Peer support was also valued; with 64% reporting a buddy service would provide useful support.

**Figure 8.1 University support nursing students would find helpful**



Counselling services were seen as useful by two thirds of nursing students responding to the survey (67%), which links to the numbers of students experiencing personal and other problems while studying and also the numbers who have considered leaving.

## 8.2 Childcare

Given the age range of nursing students, many have caring responsibilities for children, and also for other dependent adults. Half (50%) reported that child care places/facilities would help.

## 8.3 Financial support

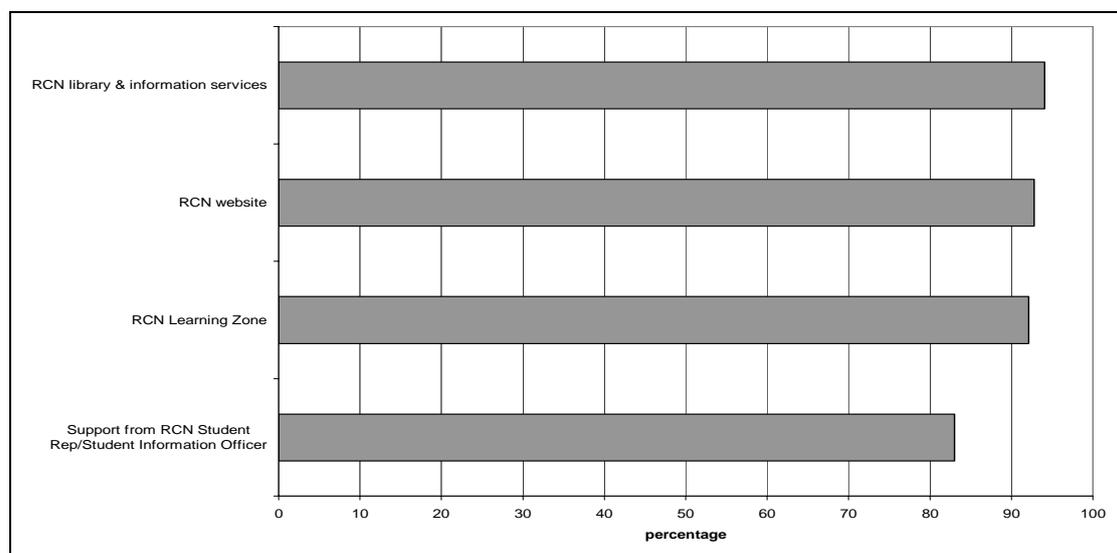
The majority of nursing students are living with the reality of debt and additional paid work during their studies. This corresponds with the majority of 88% who reported that they would find financial services helpful.

## 8.4 Support from RCN

The RCN offers nursing students a variety of direct support and information, plus access to peer support via the network of Student Information Officers (Figure 8.2).

94% reported that RCN library and information services are helpful support for nursing students, 92% reported that the RCN Learning Zone would be a support, and 93% said that the RCN website was helpful to them as a nursing student.

**Figure 8.2 RCN support nursing students would find helpful, UK**



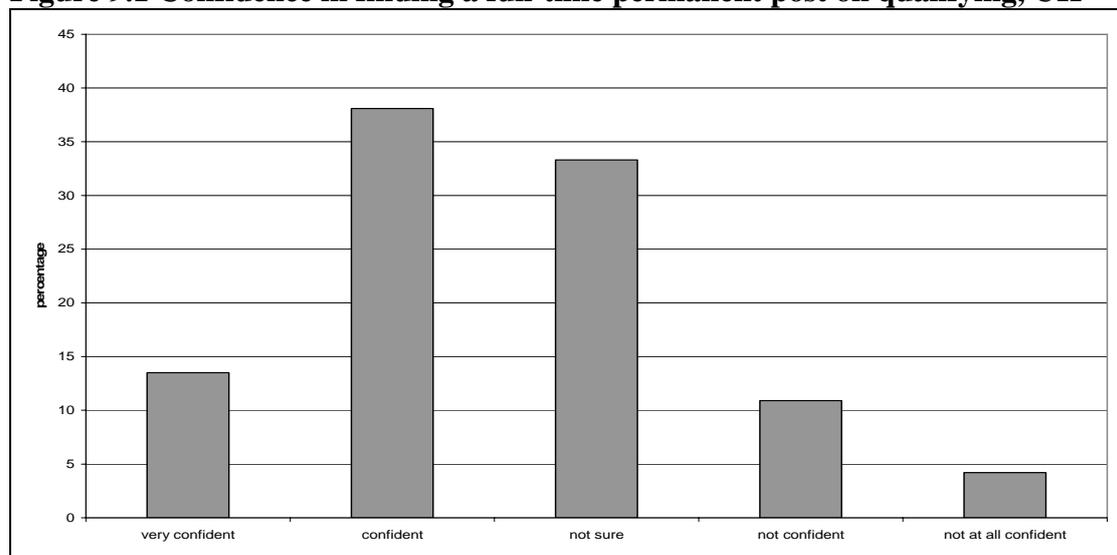
Peer support was seen as valuable, with support from an RCN Student Rep/Student Information Officer being reported by 83%. A Student Information Officer is a pre-registration nursing student who shares information from the RCN with their colleagues and can signpost their peers to information, events and support.

### 9. Hope for the future

Nursing students have high levels of motivation to complete their courses and become registered nurses, including among those who have considered leaving.

When asked about their views on finding a post when qualifying, half (52%) were confident of finding a full-time permanent post on qualifying, including 14% who were very confident. One third (33%) were not sure of their chances of securing a full-time permanent post, while 15% were not confident or not at all confident (Figure 9.1).

**Figure 9.1 Confidence in finding a full-time permanent post on qualifying, UK**



## **10. Conclusions**

As our future nursing workforce, investment in appropriate support for nursing students makes practical and financial sense. Better supported students would mean reduced student attrition with more students contributing to the nursing workforce as registered nurses.

With many now coming to nursing as a second career, at an older age, and with different career pathways into nursing, recognition must be given to the variety of flexible support that can meet the needs of this diverse student population.

Higher education institutions, Governments across the four UK countries and other stakeholders including the RCN are looking at how to improve recruitment, retention and support that can be offered to nursing students.

This survey has demonstrated that students would value a range of academic support, including additional tuition, online support and help lines with the facility for telephone support while on clinical placement. Other practical, but vital support, is to make available childcare places/facilities and support to enable parents to continue on their courses. Students also value the range of support that the RCN can offer.

Given the number of nursing students in paid work throughout their studies and while on clinical placement, financial support is of great importance. The range and level of debt and incidence of paid work highlights that the current bursary does not provide a liveable financial package. Raising the bursary would enable many students to be able to study without taking on additional paid work and debt, and also leave them more time to study.

Being able to identify those at risk of leaving, ensuring students are encouraged to inform their tutors of any difficulties and then enabling appropriate support and interventions does have the potential to encourage many more students to stay on their course and therefore enter the nursing workforce and care for patients.

## 11. Recommendations

This report has reviewed nursing students' experiences and has provided insights into demographics including age profiles. The report shows that a substantial number have considered leaving and identifies the reasons for this as well as factors that would encourage them to stay. It also looks at their experiences of paid work and financial debt, and their hopes for their future nursing career.

The following recommendations will help more students to stay on their course and enhance their learning experience:

- **recognise the changing demographics and ensure that appropriate flexible support is available to suit the diverse student population.**
- **examine the reasons why students consider leaving and ensure higher education institutions can implement and sustain policies to identify at risk students, including looking at ways to maximise tutors awareness of those considering leaving.**
- **ensure the range of possible interventions from higher education institutions to support students includes those they value including additional tuition, online support, helplines and buddy services.**
- **focus on ensuring quality clinical placements including concentrating on mentorship, communication and location of placements to reduce, where possible, unnecessary travel.**
- **provide resourced services to ensure nursing students can access counselling should they need this service.**
- **ensure childcare places/facilities and options are available to parents.**
- **address students' financial debt and levels of paid work by increasing the student bursary.**

**References:**

Ball, J and Pike, G (2007) *Holding On* Results from the 2007 RCN Employment Survey, RCN, London

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2007) *Statistical analysis of the register 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007* NMC, London



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The RCN represents nurses and nursing,  
promotes excellence in practice and  
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