

# NEXT STEPS

WHO ARE THE  
'FUTURE NURSES'?

UCAS



**NHS**

Health Education England

# CONTENTS

Foreword	3
Executive summary	4
Next steps	7
Section 1: Who applies to study nursing?	9
Section 2: Who are the 'future nurses'?	15
Section 3: What can we learn from the 'future nurses' to shape the workforce of the future?	22
Annex A: Research methods	25
Annex B: Definitions	26



# FOREWORD BY RUTH MAY AND MARK RADFORD



As registered nurses for the NHS, it's been a real pleasure to be a part of this joint work with UCAS. This report gives us valuable insights into our nurses of the future – who they are, what they believe and their motivations for choosing this worthwhile profession that we've been proud to call our own for so long.

Nurses and nursing students have always played an important role in the provision of high-quality care, and this has really come to the fore during the COVID pandemic. The last couple of years, difficult as they have been, have shone a spotlight on the value of the professions, and indeed on health and care as a whole. We are thrilled to see that there were tens of thousands of applications made through UCAS to study nursing this year, with a record number – more than 25,000 people – being offered a place on nursing programmes. In fact, nursing is now the fifth most popular subject chosen at higher education level.

We can see from this report that the focus on the contribution of nurses and nursing throughout the pandemic has played a part in increasing the number of people considering a career in nursing. Health Education England, universities, and practice placement providers have also contributed by promoting nursing careers and increasing the number of practice placements available to support nursing students, enabling them to join the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register and take up roles within our services as critical thinking professionals.



This report provides other fascinating insights into our future nurses. We can see that more 18 year olds than ever before are ready to start their nursing degrees this year. The opportunity that nursing programmes offer in widening access and participation is also evident, with 1.4 times more young people from the most disadvantaged areas choosing nursing than their most advantaged counterparts.

The insights from this work will support us, and our partners in the health and care system, to continue to build a nursing workforce that is highly skilled, critically thinking, and with the right values. Capturing the views of those starting out in their nursing career is crucial to this because they are the future of this profession.

We wish every single one of our future nurses the very best of luck through their studies and into their future careers.

**Dr Ruth May**  
**Chief Nursing Officer for England**

**Professor Mark Radford CBE**  
**Chief Nurse, Health Education England, and**  
**Deputy Chief Nursing Officer for England**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout the COVID pandemic, the vital role health and social care workers play in keeping us safe and well has never been more evident. As the NHS united to tackle the virus, a new wave of almost 160,000 aspiring medics, social workers, allied health professionals and nurses applied through UCAS and joined the sector<sup>1</sup>.

This UCAS report, in collaboration with Health Education England (HEE), focuses on the 'future nurses', painting a picture of the next generation of nurses, many of whom have been inspired by the pandemic. It seeks to understand why, at a time when health and social care services have – in many ways – never been more challenged, tens of thousands of individuals are excited to enter the nursing profession.

In 2020, a record number of students were accepted onto nursing programmes – an increase of 27% on 2019. At the end of the 2021 cycle, 25,105 applicants had been placed on nursing courses, 1.2% higher than the 2020 figure. Moreover, based on the most recent

national data from May 2021, annual starts for nursing associate programmes have remained steady (c.4,000) and numbers starting nursing degree apprenticeships have doubled to over 2,000<sup>2</sup>, despite widespread falls in apprenticeship starts during the pandemic.

Over the past twelve months, there has also been a surge in demand for information through UCAS' apprenticeship platform, **CareerFinder**. Individuals made nearly 30,000 searches for nursing, and views of nursing associate and/or nursing degree apprenticeship vacancies reached 11,500, resulting in more than 2,000 applications. In addition, HEE saw a 223% increase in interest in nursing careers via the **Health Careers** website between March 2020 and March 2021<sup>3</sup>.

Overall, since 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organisation declared the COVID outbreak a global pandemic, we estimate that more than 56,000 people have embarked upon their individual journeys to becoming a nurse<sup>4</sup>.

But who are these 'future nurses'? What, and who, has shaped and inspired their decisions? What excites and worries them most about their next steps? And, with UCAS forecasting that annual demand could reach 52,000 by 2025 – an 8% increase on the current figure<sup>5</sup>, what can we learn from these individuals to shape the workforce of the future?

<sup>1</sup> Accepted applicants to courses defined by Health Education England as healthcare courses, in both 2020 and 2021.

<sup>2</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships-and-traineeships>

<sup>3</sup> [www.hee.nhs.uk/news-blogs-events/news/huge-jump-visits-health-careers-website-thousands-consider-career-healthcare](http://www.hee.nhs.uk/news-blogs-events/news/huge-jump-visits-health-careers-website-thousands-consider-career-healthcare)

<sup>4</sup> Sum of 2020 and 2021 acceptances to nursing, plus nursing degree apprenticeship and nursing associate starts since March 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Sum of forecasted figures for all UG applicants split into key demographic groups, with average proportion of nursing applicants applied.





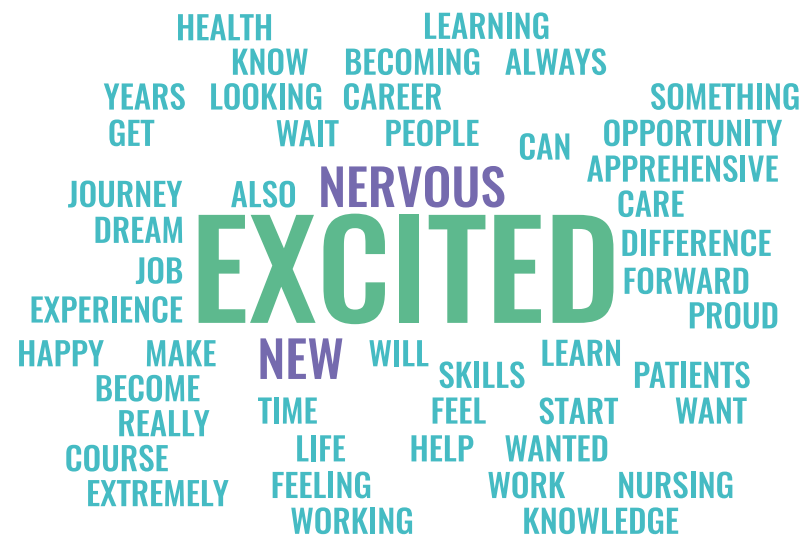
Other key findings from this report include:

- > **COVID inspires the next generation of nurses:** The pandemic inspired more than two-thirds (69%) of 2021 nursing applicants to apply, with around one in ten stating it was the most important factor.
- > **Younger applicants find value in nursing:** Numbers of 18 year olds applying to nursing in 2021 are up 38% relative to 2019, translating into an increase in acceptances of 43%.
- > **Immediate boom in mature acceptances:** 2020 sees record demand and acceptances from aspiring nurses aged 21 and above. Demand continues into 2021 (+14% on 2020), but acceptances dip (-3% on 2020).
- > **Nursing is a powerhouse for widening access and participation:** 1.4 times more young people from the most disadvantaged areas in the UK (POLAR4 quintile 1) choose to study nursing than their most advantaged counterparts (POLAR4 quintile 5). Nursing joins education and health and social care as one of only three subjects<sup>6</sup> where a 'positive equality gap' exists for both application and entry to higher education (HE).
- > **Men remain an untapped source of nurses:** The gender gap is stark with women more than 9 times more likely to choose and be placed on nursing courses – the application gap rises to 57 times for children's nursing.
- > **Society rises to the challenge of training more mental health professionals:** With UCAS reporting a 450% increase in the number of mental health declarations via the UCAS application over the last decade, COVID also stimulated an uptick in students looking to apply to mental health nursing: +30% between 2019 and 2021.
- > **EU demand holds firm amid declines for other subject areas:** EU demand for HE in England fell by 42% from 2020 to 2021<sup>7</sup>; however, demand for nursing courses rose by 6%, bucking the overall trend.
- > **Current nurses are inspiring a future generation:** Around 1 in 4 of 2021 nursing applicants state that current healthcare personnel were the most influential in their decision to apply to nursing.
- > **Nursing applicants are extremely confident in their choice of career:** 99% of 2021 nursing applicants are confident they have made the right decision to study nursing.

<sup>6</sup> Comparing HEE classification of nursing alongside Common Aggregation Hierarchy 2 (CAH2) grouped courses.

<sup>7</sup> [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021](https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021)





**Figure 1:** The most common key words in free text responses to the question: ‘How do you feel about becoming a nurse?’

This research is part of UCAS’ Next Steps series and forms part of its publications **library**, which seeks to understand the choices different groups of students make as they embark on the next stage of their education and training. Future UCAS reports will explore the journey of different groups of students, such as care-experienced students, and explore some of the big challenges facing the education and skills sector, including the promotion of the full range of post-secondary opportunities.

The report uses the definition of a nursing course used by HEE. Consequently, the nursing applicants referred to in this report are applicants to courses at English universities and colleges – this also applies to all other applicants to whom the report refers for comparison purposes. See Annex A for more information about the research methods used within the report.

# NEXT STEPS

To help ensure we continue to inspire and support individuals to join the nursing workforce, we propose the following next steps for the education and training sector:

## ENSURE THERE IS SUFFICIENT EDUCATION CAPACITY TO CAPITALISE ON THE GROWTH IN THE POPULARITY OF NURSING:

- > increase the supply of places – encompassing university and college, nursing associate and apprenticeship opportunities – to meet the government’s target to expand the nursing workforce
- > monitor the uptake of nursing among students from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure this career path does not become an out-of-reach opportunity
- > capitalise on increased demand from younger and more geographically mobile ‘future nurses’ to address challenges in regional supply.

## WORK TO BOOST THE VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL PATHWAY BOTH INTO AND WITHIN NURSING:

- > deliver personalised information, advice and guidance for students studying T levels, and promote this route into the nursing profession

- > raise awareness of the new vocational and technical routes within nursing, such as nursing associates and degree apprenticeships
- > UCAS’ and partners’ promotion of the full range of pathways to nursing, as part of its commitment to act as a ‘digital Baker clause’<sup>8</sup>.

## ADDRESS THE SIGNIFICANT GENDER IMBALANCE IN NURSING:

- > promote storytelling content and authentic role models at the heart of all talent acquisition strategies
- > engage in primary education, promoting nursing and men in nursing as role models for a young audience
- > university and college Access and Participation Plans to reference men in nursing as a target group
- > enhance the use of digital channels alongside traditional recruitment strategies.

## PROVIDE APPLICANTS WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO BECOME MORE FAMILIAR WITH CLINICAL SETTINGS:

- > virtual and physical visits to care settings and hospitals
- > buddying schemes to enable existing and trainee nurses to share experiences with applicants
- > grow awareness of clinical settings, including through UCAS events and exhibitions.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘Baker Clause’, Section 42B of the Education Act 1997, (inserted by section 2 of the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, commenced on 2 January 2018.







For the wider education and training sector there is also the opportunity to **LEARN FROM WHAT WORKS IN NURSING TO ATTRACT AND WELCOME A DIVERSE POOL OF APPLICANTS TO OTHER SUBJECT AREAS AND INDUSTRIES WHERE THE EQUALITY PICTURE IS LESS POSITIVE.** This includes:

- > building awareness of less linear pathways into post-secondary education, including HE bridging provision, foundation year programmes, and Access to HE Diploma programmes
- > growing the range and flexibility of education and training options; for example, through apprenticeships, blended study options and upcoming higher technical qualifications
- > ensuring subject-specific outreach, marketing and recruitment includes groups who are underrepresented in HE and training
- > UCAS to develop tools to support further transparency in pathways for students and advisers.



# SECTION 1: WHO APPLIES TO STUDY NURSING?

## NURSING IN CONTEXT

Nursing is the fifth most popular subject at higher education (HE) level<sup>9</sup>. For comparison, business and management is the most popular, and medicine is fifteenth. Following a dip in demand following the removal of bursary funding from 1 August 2017, the appetite for nursing courses recovered, before increasing rapidly during COVID. In 2021, there were 48,110 total applicants, 28,815 of whom received an offer and chose a nursing course as their first choice (firm applicant), and 25,105 of whom were then accepted on to nursing programmes. In this report, the term ‘nursing applicant’ refers to firm nursing applicants.

Just over half of those who apply for nursing each year get a place on one of these courses, equating to a 52% acceptance rate, compared to an average acceptance rate of 51%<sup>10</sup>. Each year, around 20,000 aspiring nurses are unplaced – these students are more likely to be aged 21 and above and at the lower end of the attainment spectrum<sup>11</sup>, demonstrating the competitiveness of the subject. Every year, 3,000 nursing applicants reapply, further showing the high demand to enter these courses.

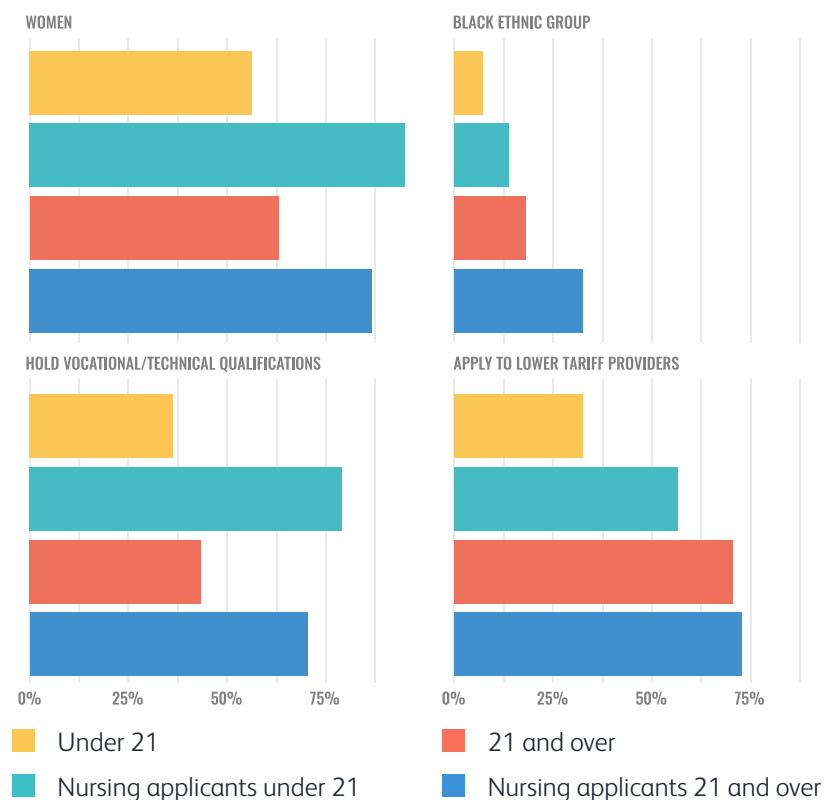
## NURSING ATTRACTS MATURE STUDENTS IN HIGH VOLUMES

60% of nursing applicants can be described as ‘mature applicants’ – defined as those aged 21 and above applying to an HE course. Nursing applicants make up one in seven (15%) of all applicants aged 30 – 34, and one in five (18%) of all applicants aged 35 and above. Comparing nursing applicants with both the broader younger (under 21) and mature (21 and above) applicant cohorts allows us to identify where trends in nursing applicants differ to those of the average applicant of that age.

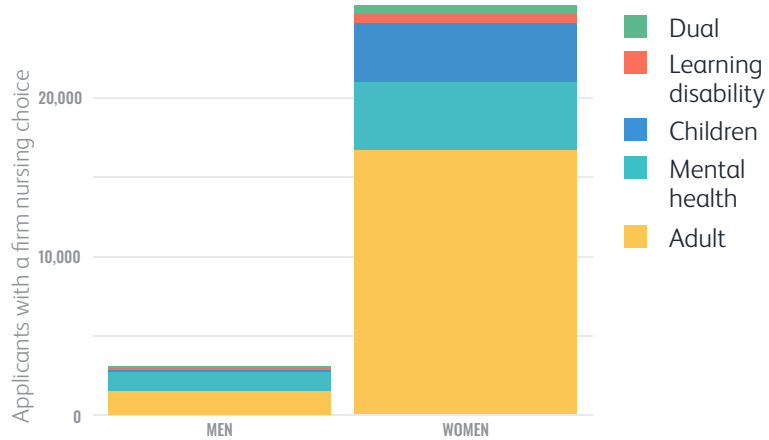
<sup>9</sup> Ranking firm applicants to HEE classification of nursing alongside Common Aggregation Hierarchy 2 (CAH2) grouped courses.

<sup>10</sup> Mean acceptance rate across all CAH2 grouped courses. Acceptance rate in this instance is defined as the sum of fractional acceptances to each CAH2 group divided by the sum of the fractional contribution of each applicant to a CAH2 group, the maximum contribution being 1.

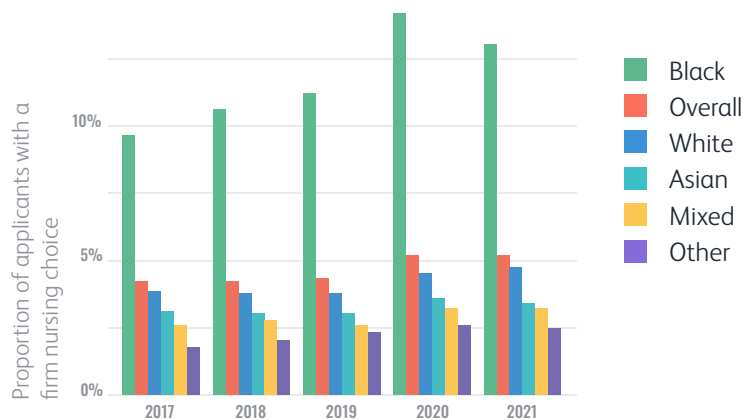
<sup>11</sup> Attainment measured as the A level point score of UK 18 year olds with at least three achieved A levels. A level points are the numeric scores awarded to A level grades (e.g. A\* is 6 points, A is 5 points, etc). The sum of the highest three A level grades will count towards a student's point score.



**Figure 2:** The proportion of nursing applicants under 21, applicants under 21, nursing applicants aged 21 and above, and applicants aged 21 and above for the 2021 cycle, and for a range of characteristics. Black ethnic group includes UK applicants only.



**Figure 3:** The number of 2021 nursing applicants split by branch and gender.



**Figure 4:** The proportion of UK undergraduate applicants 2017 – 2021 holding a firm nursing choice split by ethnic group.

The data outlined in Figure 2 shows that nursing applicants are more likely to be:

### WOMEN

Women are 9.1 times more likely to choose nursing than men. 33 women in every 10,000<sup>12</sup> chose to study nursing in 2021 relative to four men in every 10,000, noting that 350 people in every 10,000 applied to HE in 2021. This gender gap has remained consistently stubborn for 15 years. Nearly half (44%) of male nursing applicants applied to study mental health nursing, compared to only 17% of female nursing applicants, lowering the gender gap to 3.4. On the other hand, 14% of female nursing applicants applied to children’s nursing, compared to just 2% of men, increasing the gender gap to 57.

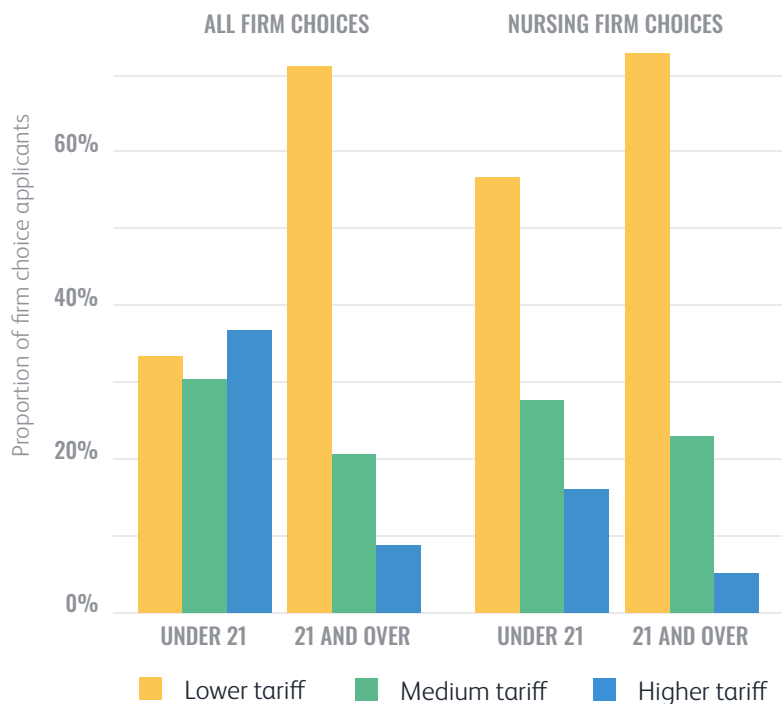
### BLACK

Nursing applicants are 2.5 times more likely to be Black than the overall UK university and college applicant cohort, with 25% of UK-domiciled nursing applicants stating their Black ethnicity on the UCAS application form. Black nursing applicants are overrepresented for both the younger and, to an even greater extent, older age groups, at 14% and 32% respectively.



<sup>12</sup> Comparing firm nursing applicants to the population of 18-35 year olds in the UK, based on ONS mid-year estimates.





**Figure 5:** The proportion of firm choice applicants and nursing firm choice applicants split by age group and tariff group of provider in 2021.

## HOLDING VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL QUALIFICATIONS

Three quarters (74%) of nursing applicants hold vocational and technical qualifications, compared to two in five (38%) of all applicants. This includes 43% of mature nursing applicants holding Access to HE Diplomas, and 17% of nursing applicants under the age of 21 holding a BTEC Extended Diploma, compared to 18% and 7% of all applicants respectively. Nursing applicants are also 2.7 times more likely to hold a Level 4 qualification or higher, due to the larger numbers of students returning to education after time in the workforce.

## STUDYING AT LOWER TARIFF PROVIDERS

Two thirds (66%) of nursing applicants choose to study at lower tariff providers, with these applicants making up almost one in ten (9%) of all firm choices to lower tariff providers. When comparing the pattern of tariff groups nursing applicants choose with those chosen by the wider applicant cohort, we see that, regardless of age, these applicants behave more like mature students. Nursing applicants under the age of 21 are almost twice as likely (1.7 times) to choose to study at a lower tariff provider than all applicants of the same age. This is most likely explained by the supply of courses – of the 360 nursing courses listed on the UCAS search tool, 220 are at lower tariff providers<sup>13</sup>.



<sup>13</sup> Nursing courses listed on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com) in October 2021.

## NURSING PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN WIDENING ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

Reversing the atypical pattern of participation in HE, 1.4 times more young people from the most disadvantaged areas in the UK (POLAR4 Q1) choose nursing than their most advantaged counterparts (POLAR4 Q5)<sup>14</sup>. Conversely, young people from the most advantaged group are 3.5 times more likely to choose medicine than their disadvantaged counterparts. This trend also carries through to entry to HE – nursing joins education and health and social care as one of only three subjects<sup>15</sup> where such a 'positive equality gap' exists.

SUBJECT	ENTRY RATE	Q5:Q1 ENTRY RATE RATIO
Health and social care	0.4%	0.5
<b>Nursing</b>	0.9%	0.7
Education	0.8%	0.9
Law	1.9%	1.3
Sport and exercise sciences	1.3%	1.4
Medicine and dentistry	0.8%	3.5
Languages, linguistics and classics	0.6%	3.9
Politics	0.8%	4.5
Geographical and environmental studies	0.7%	5.0
Economics	1.1%	7.0

**Figure 6:** The top five and bottom five CAH2 grouped subjects ranked by POLAR4 Q5:Q1 18 year old entry rate ratio, for subject groups with over 2,500 accepted applicants in 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Calculated using the rate of firm 18 year old applicants per 18 year old population in POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ranking HEE classification of nursing alongside CAH2 grouped courses.

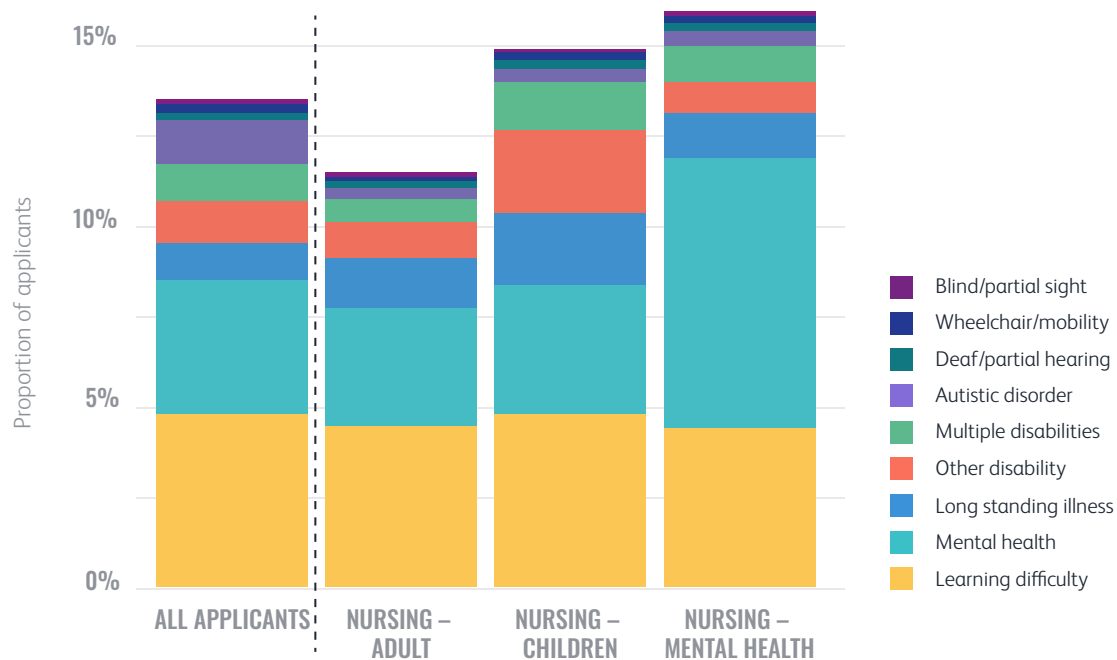






## CHOICE OF BRANCH OF NURSING APPEARS TO BE INFLUENCED BY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

13% of UK domiciled nursing applicants chose to declare a disability in their UCAS application, compared to 14% of all UK applicants. Those applying to mental health nursing are twice as likely (2.0 times) to declare a mental health condition than the average UK applicant, and students applying to children's nursing are over twice as likely (2.1 times) to declare a long-standing illness.



**Figure 7:** The proportion of UK domiciled applicants declaring a disability overall, and for each of the main branches of nursing, for the 2021 cycle.

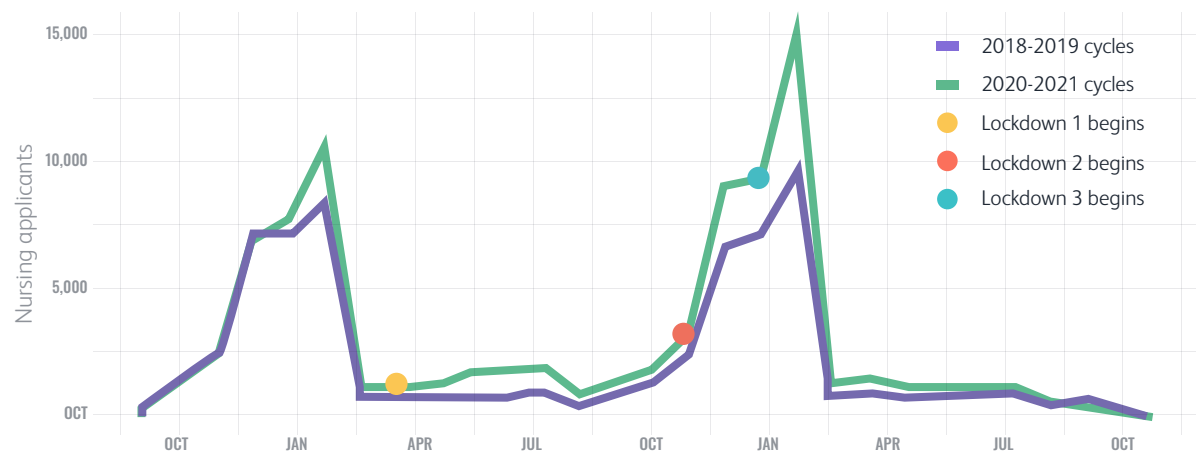




## SECTION 2: WHO ARE THE 'FUTURE NURSES'?

### COVID TRIGGERS A SURGE IN THE POPULARITY OF NURSING

As UCAS **research** has previously shown, student decision making does not happen in a vacuum, but is influenced by societal factors. While COVID has been described as the 'biggest NHS challenge since World War Two'<sup>19</sup>, it has triggered a surge in the popularity of nursing. Evidence from a new UCAS survey of nearly 3,000 UK firm nursing applicants applying for 2021 entry reaffirms this.



**Figure 9:** Total numbers of applicants to nursing courses per four-week period during the pandemic period (2020 and 2021 cycles) relative to the previous two cycles (2018 and 2019)<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-56605179](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-56605179)

<sup>20</sup> The date of the second January peak differs between time series due to the change to the UCAS deadline date – from 15 January in 2018-2020, to 29 January in 2021.

The pandemic inspired **more than two thirds (69%)** of applicants to apply to nursing

“I had already decided before the pandemic, but it gave me more motivation that it was the right decision.”  
“The need to have a COVID-free world.”

Applicants are most likely (**66%**) to be inspired by the **efforts of frontline workers**

“I truly feel like I will be giving back to the nurses who worked so hard throughout this pandemic.”

Younger applicants now have a **‘better understanding of what it means to be a nurse’ (64%)**

“COVID showed me the amazing work nurses do, to preserve the life of others.”

Mature applicants want to **‘help the country recover’ (61%)**

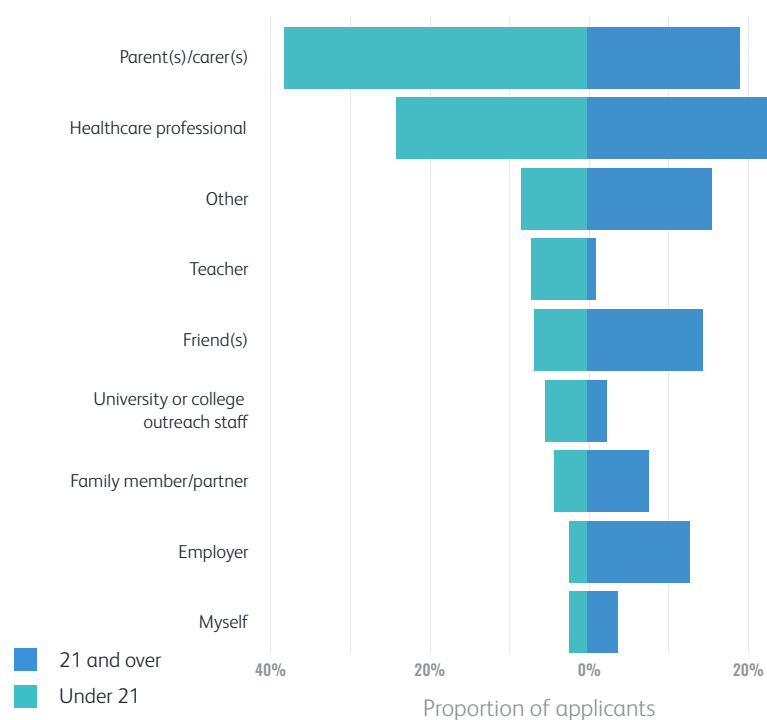
“Helping the country get back to ‘normal’.”

**Figure 10:** Findings from responses to the questions: ‘To what extent did the COVID-19 pandemic inspire your decision to apply to nursing’ and ‘What was it about the COVID-19 pandemic that inspired your decision to apply to nursing?’



## CURRENT NURSES ARE INSPIRING A FUTURE GENERATION

Overall, around one in four respondents state that healthcare personnel were most influential in their decision to apply to nursing – they are the most significant influencer for those aged 21 and over (24%), whereas younger nursing applicants cite their parents or carers (38%). 35% of respondents say that media campaigns promoting NHS careers were ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ influential, with social media campaigns having the largest reach.



**Figure 11:** Proportion of survey respondents answering the question ‘Who was most influential in your decision to apply to nursing’, split by age group.

## NURSING APPLICANTS ARE EXTREMELY CONFIDENT IN THEIR CHOICE OF CAREER

**99% of respondents are confident that they have made the right decision to study nursing**

“I am feeling confident and excited about going into a career that I am passionate about. I am looking forward to helping people and putting smiles on their faces.”

**The chance to help people and the opportunity to make a difference are ‘very influential’ for 94% of respondents in their decision to apply to nursing**

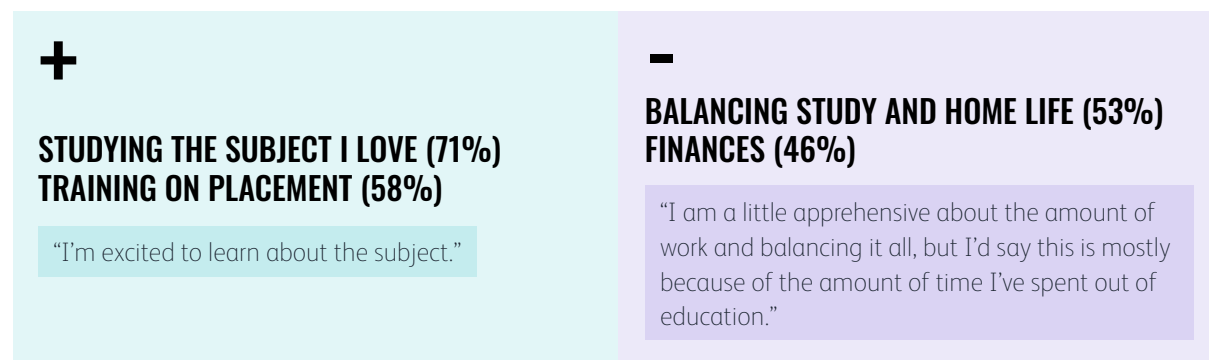
“Beyond grateful to have the opportunity to help others.”

**Job security is more important to older nurses: ‘very influential’ for 62% of those aged 21 and above vs. 47% of applicants under 21**

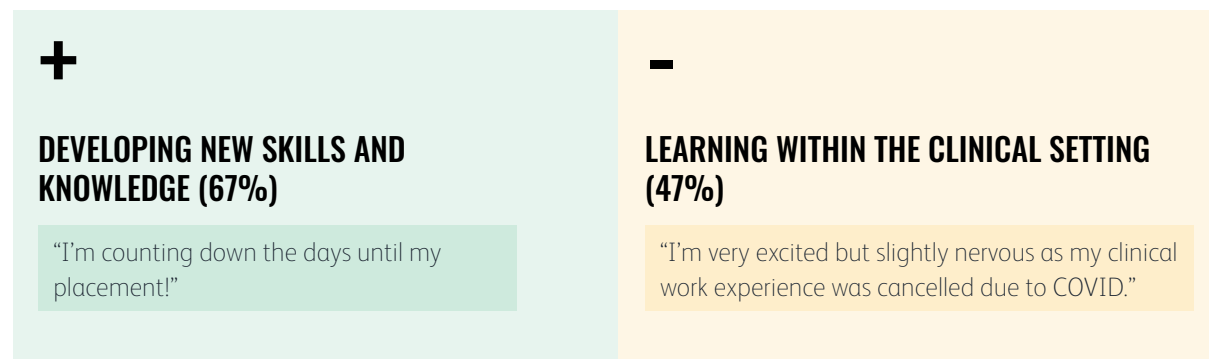
“I know that after my nursing studies there [will be] job security and prospects.”

**Figure 12:** Findings from responses to the questions: ‘How confident are you that you’ve made the right decision to study nursing’ and ‘How influential were each of the following in your decision to apply to nursing?’

## THE MAJORITY SPEAK OF A LOVE OF THE PROFESSION, BUT ALSO WORRY ABOUT HOW TO BALANCE STUDY AND HOME LIFE



**Figure 13:** Findings from responses to the questions: ‘Which two aspects of your degree are you most excited/apprehensive about?’



**Figure 14:** Findings from responses to the questions: ‘Which two aspects of your practice placement are you most excited/apprehensive about?’







The 2020 and 2021 cohorts appear to have attracted a new demographic to study nursing, with several notable trends emerging during the pandemic.

### YOUNGER APPLICANTS FIND VALUE IN NURSING

As discussed in Section 1, the cohort of nursing applicants has traditionally skewed towards the mature age groups. While this trend was somewhat magnified by the start of the pandemic, the 18 year old age group saw the second largest increase, with 875 more applicants in 2020 and a further growth of 1,075 applicants in 2021. Indeed, UCAS polling shows that younger applicants are more likely (73% of those 21 and under relative to 67% for those aged 21 and above) to have been inspired by the pandemic to apply to nursing. This has translated into a 43% increase in 18 year old placed nursing applicants starting their training in 2021, relative to 2019 – the largest growth of any age group.

### ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTIES SEE AN IMMEDIATE BOOM IN MATURE ACCEPTANCES

UCAS research has previously forecast a spike in mature applicants linked to a weaker job market during the pandemic. Nursing has followed this pattern – the number of people aged 21 and above applying to nursing courses rose by 29% between 2019 and 2020, and a further 14% between 2020 and 2021. Analysis of free text responses highlights several examples of older applicants pursuing internal progression from roles, such as healthcare assistants within the NHS, illustrating the power of authentic role models within the profession.

**“MY JOB AS A SUPPORT WORKER FOR PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES MADE ME WANT TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP.”**

**“I HAVE ALWAYS WANTED TO PURSUE NURSING AND HAVE BEEN AN HCA [HEALTHCARE ASSISTANT] FOR 7 YEARS.”**

However, high demand has not always translated into new nursing students. Mature acceptances rose by 34% in 2020, but then saw a slight dip (-3%) in 2021 despite the demand. This pattern was reflected in the wider applicant cohort, which saw mature demand increase from 2020 to 2021 (+4%), but acceptances fall (-3%)<sup>21</sup>.

### MORE GEOGRAPHICALLY MOBILE ‘FUTURE NURSES’ START THEIR TRAINING

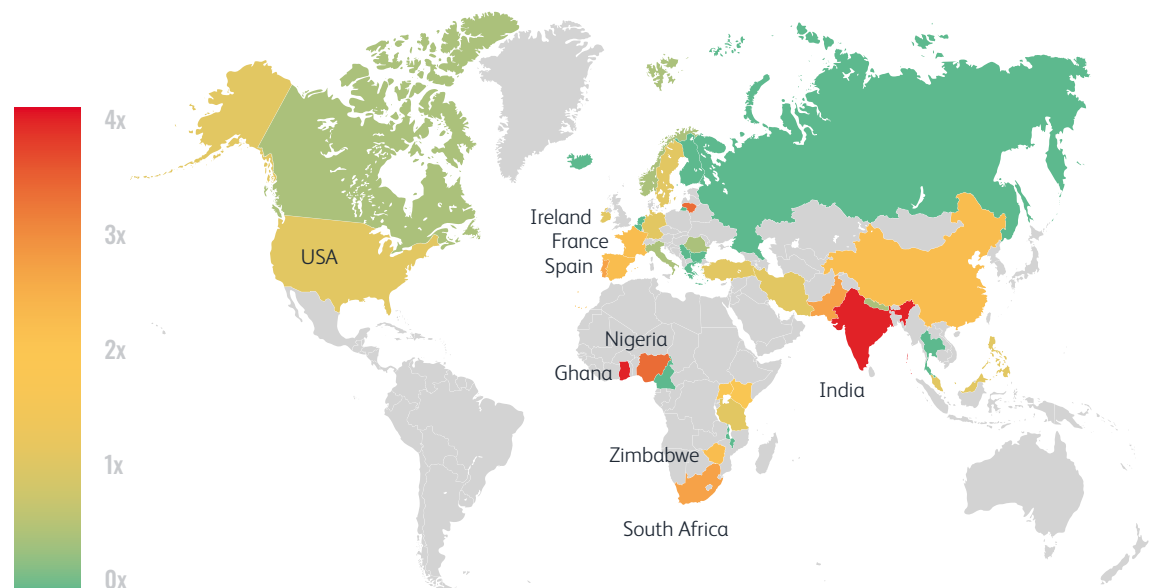
Nursing has typically attracted large numbers of local applicants, not least due to high numbers of mature students; the average drive time for a nursing applicant over the past five years is around 40 minutes, relative to the average of nearly 90 minutes for all UK applicants. However, driven by the uplift in younger applicants referenced above, more than 1,300 additional applicants chose to study at universities or colleges more than 90 minutes from their home in 2021 relative to 2019. This led to a 51% uplift in nursing students starting courses outside an hour and a half radius from home.

This is important because, as our polling shows, those aged 21 and above are also most likely to be expecting to seek employment closer to home (47%, relative to 28% for those under 21), whilst their younger peers are more likely to anticipate being open to a range of locations (38%, relative to 26% for those aged 21 and above). The younger ‘future nurses’ are therefore more geographically mobile, and able to flexibly address regional ‘cold spots’ in supply.

<sup>21</sup> [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021](https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021)

## EU DEMAND HOLDS FIRM AMID DECLINES FOR OTHER SUBJECTS

Changes to EU funding arrangements post-Brexit saw overall EU demand for HE in England fall by 42% from 2020 to 2021<sup>22</sup>; however, demand for nursing courses rose by 6% (+15) last cycle, bucking the overall trend. Since the start of the pandemic, demand for nursing from outside of the EU has risen by 118% (from 0.3% to 0.5% of overall applicants). Whilst these applicants still only account for one in 74 acceptances to nursing courses, COVID does not appear to have negatively impacted on appetite from international students to study nursing in England. Growing international markets for nursing are Nigeria (+155, +250%), India (+40, +280%), and Hong Kong (+25, +256%), with steady appetite from Ireland at +36% (+55)<sup>23</sup>.



**Figure 15:** The relative growth in international nursing applicants between 2019 and 2021 by country. Top countries for nursing applicants are labelled.

<sup>22</sup> [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021](https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021)

<sup>23</sup> Absolute and percentage changes in firm nursing applicants since 2019.





## MENTAL HEALTH NURSING GROWS IN POPULARITY BEFORE PLATEAUIING

Multiple population measures revealed deteriorations in mental health and wellbeing linked to the pandemic<sup>24</sup>; for example, between June 2019 and March 2020, 10% of adults were experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of depression but, by June 2020, this had almost doubled to 19%<sup>25</sup>. UCAS has **reported** a consistent uplift in mental health declarations by applicants living in the UK – a rise of 450% over the past decade – and this trend is likely to accelerate post-COVID. During the pandemic, numbers choosing to study mental health nursing rose sharply (+36% in 2020), before plateauing in 2021, amounting to an overall increase of 30% (4,335 in 2019 vs. 5,615 in 2021). This is key at a point where mental health services are preparing for a **surge in demand**.

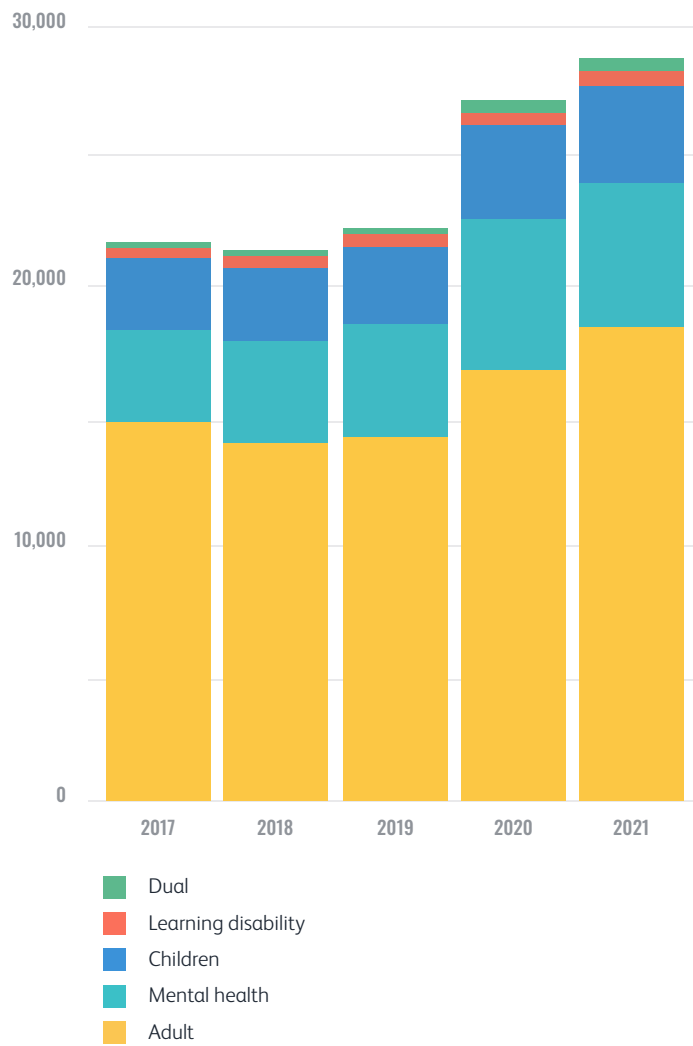
***“I AM WORKING AS A MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT WORKER AND WANTED TO EXPAND MY EXPERIENCE AND PROVIDE HELP AND SUPPORT TO PEOPLE WHO NEED IT.”***

***“THE PANDEMIC SHOWED ME THE DEMAND AND NEED FOR MORE MENTAL HEALTH NURSES – I WANT TO JOIN THE NHS TO HELP.”***

<sup>24</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-surveillance-report/2-important-findings-so-far](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-surveillance-report/2-important-findings-so-far)

<sup>25</sup> [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusanddepressioninadultsgreatbritain/latest](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusanddepressioninadultsgreatbritain/latest)





**Figure 16:** The number of applicants to nursing courses, split by branch of nursing for 2017 – 2021.



# SECTION 3: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE 'FUTURE NURSES' TO SHAPE THE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE?

## NOW IS THE TIME TO BUILD A PIPELINE FOR THE NURSING WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

This report tells the story of how the pandemic inspired thousands to enter the nursing profession. However, this phenomenon is not unique to nursing; the pandemic period has seen unprecedented demand for post-secondary education and training. This trend of rising demand is set to continue: UCAS projects the 2025 cycle could see almost one million applicants – around 25% more than in 2021. About 40% of this increase will be attributable to a growth in demand from UK 18 year olds (driven by both an increase in application rates and an increase in the population) with the remaining 60% driven by continued growth in mature and international demand<sup>26</sup>.

When we adjust this forecast for nursing, based on the average proportion of applicants to nursing in each age group, we find that annual demand could reach 52,000 by 2025 – an 8% increase on the current figure. However, the post-COVID economic climate remains uncertain, and the below-trend acceptance rate for mature applicants demonstrates the ongoing challenge of continuing to attract talent into the workforce. We also know from previous **research** that increased competition can lead to more disadvantaged students missing out as they are much more likely to be at the lower end of the attainment spectrum.

Ensure there is sufficient education capacity to capitalise on the growth in the popularity of nursing. Amid projections of rising overall demand for higher education and training, this will ensure nursing does not become an out-of-reach opportunity.

<sup>26</sup> Sum of forecasted figures for all UG applicants split into key demographic groups.







## VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION REFORMS WILL TRANSFORM NURSING PATHWAYS

Following the post-16 qualifications review, the next decade will see an overhaul in technical education, including T Levels, **higher technical qualifications** – the health and science route will be introduced for first teaching in September 2023 - and the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, linked to the **Skills for Jobs White Paper** and subsequent **Skills and Post-16 Education Bill**. These reforms, as a package, present opportunities for students to access new and varied routes into and within the nursing profession.

Additionally, the **NHS Long Term Plan** set out bold ambitions for apprenticeships<sup>27</sup> and the most recent data from May 2021 has seen an increase of 4,400 more nursing associate apprenticeship starts – meaning a total of 13,600 people have started training. Numbers starting nursing degree apprenticeships have increased by more than 2,000 over the same 12-month period.<sup>28</sup>

Work to boost the existing vocational and technical pathway into and within nursing via the promotion of new and upcoming vocational and technical qualifications and pathways.

<sup>27</sup> The NHS Long Term Plan suggested that 7,500 new nursing associates would start in 2019 (a 50% increase on the ambition for 5,000 starting in 2018, though the delivery date for the target was later changed to March 2020).

<sup>28</sup> [www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/nhs-staffing-tracker/training/#training](https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/nhs-staffing-tracker/training/#training) using data from <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships-and-traineeships>





## MEN REMAIN AN UNTAPPED SOURCE OF NURSES

The underrepresentation of men within the nursing profession is well understood. This report finds that just one in ten nursing applicants are male, and women are 9.1 times more likely to be placed on a nursing course.

Notwithstanding recent campaigns such as the 'Men in Nursing' campaign run by NHS England in 2019, there remains a great opportunity to grow the supply of nurses by attracting more men into the profession. Reducing the gender gap by just 10% could see an additional 280 men embark on nursing training. The power of social media campaigns in influencing career choice illustrates the benefits of using digital channels alongside traditional recruitment strategies to attract men into the profession.

Address the significant gender imbalance in nursing by attracting more men into the profession.

## EXPOSURE TO CLINICAL LEARNING SETTINGS COULD HELP NURSING APPLICANTS FEEL MORE PREPARED FOR THEIR STUDIES

The clinical environment is recognised as foundational to the training of nurses. As the Medical Teacher journal acknowledges, 'there is no comparison to the learning that comes from managing patients in a real clinical context'<sup>29</sup>. And yet, nursing applicants are most apprehensive about learning within the clinical setting when considering their hopes and dreams for their placement. The pandemic has exacerbated students' natural fears of the unknown with cancelled work experience and restrictions around volunteering.

Provide applicants with opportunities to gain greater familiarity with clinical settings prior to the start of their placements.

## OTHER SECTORS CAN LEARN FROM NURSING TO WIDEN ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

Analysis within this report shows that nursing attracts one of the highest proportions of Black applicants, mature students, and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Contributing factors include:

- > availability of non-linear routes into nursing, including HE bridging provision, foundation year programmes, and Access to HE Diploma programmes. Applicants choosing to study nursing hold a quarter (25%) of the Access to HE Diploma qualifications held by the 2021 applicant cohort, over 90% of which are held by mature applicants
- > investment in nursing associates and degree apprenticeships
- > outreach, marketing, recruitment and retention focuses on priority groups; for example, rooted in places of deprivation as per the **Nottingham Trent University programme** targeted at growing the nursing workforce in Mansfield and Ashfield, and the **Model Employer** strategy which sets the expectation that each NHS organisation will set its own target for BME representation
- > grants such as the **NHS learning support fund** which offers eligible students additional support while studying for their degree, including a training grant of £5,000 per year and an exceptional hardship fund of up to £3,000 per student per academic year
- > flexibility of education and training options; for example, the **Blended Learning Nursing Degree Programme**, which offers predominantly online, remote-access study to those who may have the aptitude and values to join the healthcare profession but are unable to learn in traditional ways. Also, the upcoming introduction of **higher technical qualifications** for the health and science route – for first teaching in September 2023.

Learn from what works in nursing to attract and welcome a diverse pool of applicants to other subject areas and industries where the equality picture is less positive.

<sup>29</sup> [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0142159X.2019.1566601](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0142159X.2019.1566601)

## ANNEX A: RESEARCH METHODS

The report uses the definition of a nursing course used by Health Education England (HEE), using a list of courses classified as nursing by HEE. Consequently, the nursing applicants referred to in this report are limited to applicants to courses at English providers; this can include those who have applied to English universities and colleges only, or to a combination of English and other UK universities and colleges.

The nursing courses included in this definition consist of undergraduate nursing degrees and degrees for branches of nursing. The definition excludes nursing associate courses and postgraduate 'top-up' courses for healthcare personnel.

The main new evidence comes from a new UCAS survey of 2,690 firm nursing applicants from the UK, who applied by the 30 June application deadline for 2021 entry. Results of the survey are weighted to make responses representative of the applicant population. We also make use of results from UCAS' new applicant survey for the 2021 cycle and other published research.





# ANNEX B: DEFINITIONS

**HE** – Higher education

**Nursing applicant (or firm nursing applicant)** - unless otherwise specified, this refers to an applicant of any domicile to one of the HEE-classified courses at an English provider who has received an offer and subsequently chosen this course as their firm choice. The cycle point for the data is the end of the 2021 cycle, with comparisons to previous cycles being made at the end of each respective cycle

**Mature** – applicants to HE aged 21 and above, as defined by HESA<sup>30</sup>

**Provider tariff group** - The grouping of providers based on the average levels of attainment of their UK 18 year old accepted applicants (summarised through UCAS Tariff points) in recent cycles. The groups are higher tariff, medium tariff, and lower tariff. Each group of providers accounted for around a third of all UK 18 year old acceptances in recent cycles

---

<sup>30</sup> [www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/students](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/students)







© UCAS 2021

All rights reserved.

UCAS is a registered trade mark.

UCAS, a company limited by guarantee, is registered in England and Wales.  
Registered number: 2839815.

Registered charity number:  
1024741 (England and Wales) and SC038598 (Scotland)

Publication reference: MD-7364

Published by: UCAS, Rosehill, New Barn Lane, Cheltenham, GL52 3LZ.