**Celebrating graduate registered nurses**

Phill Hoddinott, Senior Lecturer, School of Health and Social Care, Department of Nursing and Midwifery, Adult Nursing Division, London South Bank University, hoddinop@lsbu.ac.uk; Twitter @PhillHRN

Once the 2021/2022 academic year drew to a close, all of us working in nursing academia in universities across the UK began getting ready for the next academic year. Similar to the preparations of New Year’s Eve, it’s a busy time. I find it an exciting time, especially welcoming our new students into the nursing profession right at the very start of their nursing journey. This always makes me think about my first day back in 1996, the excitement, nervousness and anticipation I felt around starting my nursing adventure. It’s also wonderful to see our established nursing students move into the next part of their studies, seeing and hearing how they have changed and are becoming more independent in their learning, thinking and clinical practice. The new academic year is much more than welcoming our new nursing recruits. It’s also a time for goodbyes and celebrating success; it’s graduation season. Graduation Day is a highlight of the academic calendar, a ceremony which is often celebrated in a prestigious local location where the award of the graduand is formally conferred alongside the opportunity to walk across a platform while others cheer or quietly recognise the individual’s momentous achievement of becoming a registered nurse (RN). It’s a day to celebrate with friends, family, supporters, fellow graduands and academic staff. Outside of the bright lights and prestige of the graduation ceremony, it’s important for us to stop and think about how we as a nursing profession arrived at being able to walk across that stage in the first place. Over the past three decades, nurse education has gone through major reform and change – from Project 2000 in the 1990s when pre-registration nurse education moved into universities, to 2009 when nursing moved to becoming an all-degree profession. There are now much more varied routes into nursing from apprenticeships, a more employer-led route, to the introduction of foundation degrees and the regulation of nursing associates through Nursing and Midwifery Council registration. University education has changed the landscape of preregistration nursing. Most universities have moved on from the degree-only offer and have additional higher level studies such as postgraduate diploma and Master’s degreelevel programmes on offer too. We in the nursing profession should be proud of the impact of this. The nursing workforce is much more diverse through offering these different routes and access options and we have clearly demonstrated that a nursing workforce that is highly skilled and educated brings many benefits to healthcare. For me, the importance of nursing being a graduate profession is multilayered, parity being a significant factor. Many healthcare professions have been degree only for many years and this move has put RNs on the same platform as our multidisciplinary team colleagues. This demonstrates that nursing is a science in its own right and not only the art of caring. As RNs, we are the practitioners who are with the patients and service users for the majority of the time, we assess, implement, evaluate, revise and escalate, so who wouldn’t want this very important person to be highly educated? Of course, there are critics of the academic direction nursing has taken. For every piece of literature that supports graduate nurses you will find another saying it makes little difference to the provision of nursing care. Critics often tell me that they feel that their experience and skill has been overtaken by qualifications on a piece of paper and question how nurses can be taught the art of nursing in a university setting. And they are right, nursing can’t be taught solely in a lecture theatre or simulated clinical space, which is why the skills and expertise of our supervisors, assessors, clinical educators, the multidisciplinary team and link lecturers are so important on clinical placements. I was recently at a summer barbecue where over a burger and a glass of Pimms, I became involved in a discussion with a fellow guest who shared their view that nurses do not need to have a degree and it puts people off from going into nursing. I of course disagreed, I am a proud RN who works in a university to grow the next generation of RNs. A valid point, however, was being made. Most universities do offer widening access to nursing; however, more work needs to be done to promote the various routes into nursing to try to counteract the acute crisis currently facing the recruitment and retention of RNs. I attended a postponed graduation ceremony earlier this year where we celebrated hundreds of new RNs. This was very much a celebration of their success but also an acknowledgment of how hard they had worked to complete their studies during a global pandemic. I was struck by the pride people felt walking across the stage. Many were the first generation of their family to go to university, others had completed a degree against all odds. One graduand walked across the platform hand in hand with her young daughter, a powerful action that I hope will inspire future generations as much as it inspired me. Let me sign off by wishing you all a very happy new (academic) year, and during this graduation season please take some time to consider why these ceremonies take place. Let’s celebrate not only the individual but the profession of nursing, and realise the importance of the graduate RNs. I will be tipping my mortarboard cap to you all.