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The shortage of nurses remains a key challenge for all health-care systems and, for developed countries, there is a need to recognise that addressing shortages with overseas nurses is not a viable long-term option. Recruiting and retaining national and local workforces is thus a priority. This paper, a preliminary study in one college in Ireland, makes a timely contribution to informing development of local recruitment strategies and highlights the needs of different groups of potential recruits to the profession. Although Ireland's route to nurse registration of a four-year specialty-based degree differs from those in other OECD countries (Robinson and Griffiths, 2007) the findings have relevance elsewhere.

In the UK, concerns that people are unaware of the satisfaction of nursing work today and the diverse career opportunities now available led to action on agreeing and communicating key messages about the profession (Department of Health, 2006). This study explored perceptions of people at the start of their nursing degree about the extent to which various strategies had attracted them to nursing and the particular college.

An important set of findings concerned mature entrants. They were less likely than others to have attended the open day or the evening sessions, or received a prospectus, or have applied elsewhere. Mature entrants have long featured in national recruitment policies on the grounds that: they are likely to comprise a local workforce representing the client population; are more likely to stay having entered nursing in later life; and their local commitments may preclude moving elsewhere. Since most mature entrants participating in recruitment activities reported that these had positively influenced decisions to enter nursing, the author argues that consideration must be given to how information can be more effectively targeted at this group. However, the study considered mature entrants as a single group. The attractions of nursing for those who, for example, raise families before working may differ from those who experience other occupations first; understanding these will better inform recruitment of this diverse group.

Analysis by gender was lacking, but understanding what attracts men to nursing is essential especially since recent analyses show decreasing numbers of male applicants (National Nursing Research Unit, 2009). For some respondents, previous contact with

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health care had positively influenced decisions to enter nursing. Although numbers were too small for analysis by branch, other research has shown that mental health and learning disability nurses are less likely than general and paediatric nurses to have had prior specialty experience (Hardyman and Robinson, 2001). Ways of providing prior experience need to be explored in developing branch recruitment strategies.

This study provides a good basis for further development of the questionnaire and, as the author observes, needs replicating with larger numbers. Further research should include potential entrants; this would build on work by Arnold et al. (2003) which explored what deters people from nursing and the allied health professions as well as what attracts them.

Respondents were attracted to nursing by the caring nature of the work and by career opportunities but, as the author argues, managers need to ensure that these are a reality if campaigns are not to be discredited. However, events that can militate against satisfying work and careers may be out of the control of local management. Commitment at a national level to ensuring that nursing is properly resourced is essential for sustaining improved recruitment and retention.

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Sarah Robinson is Senior Research Fellow at the National Nursing Research Unit, King's College London, where she has been responsible for research in three areas: responsibilities and careers of midwives; nurses' roles and education in relation to violence in patient care settings; and careers and working lives of nurses. Current research interests focus on career development and impact of current reforms on working lives.