

Bridging the Gap: Evaluating the Impact of the Pilot Phase of the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme for Nursing



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Executive Summary

Background

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the NHS has experienced an increasing departure of staff, particularly in Wales, where 1,370 nursing professionals left the permanent register in 2022-2023. At the same time, Wales faces over 2,500 vacancies in nursing, midwifery, and health visiting, resulting in a vacancy rate of 9.3%. In response to declining enrolments in nursing courses across Wales and to tackle these issues, Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) launched the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme for Nursing. This initiative targets learners with the potential to study nursing but who need additional preparation. It offers a six-month blend of paid Healthcare Support Worker (HCSW) roles and educational support to bridge gaps in knowledge and experience before pursuing a nursing degree. Designed and delivered in collaboration with key stakeholders, the programme pilot commenced in October 2023 with the first cohort of six learners who completed the programme in March 2024.

Aim

To evaluate the pilot RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme for Nursing, which supports the transition to undergraduate nursing programmes.

Method

The study, conducted from October 2023 to June 2024, employed a mixed methods design. The research included: a) two focus groups (n = 6 learners); b) online semi-structured interviews with facilitators from USW, HEIW, and members from Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (n = 6 stakeholders); and c) secondary analysis of the Academic Behavioural Confidence (ABC) Scale data collected by HEIW at three points - before the start of the programme (October 2023), at the end of the programme (March 2024) and three months post-programme (June 2024). Despite low survey return rates affecting the quantitative aspect, data analysis involved generating unabridged transcripts (5 hours of recorded interviews; 150 pages of transcript), and conducting thematic analysis supported by NVivo 12 software. Coding was conducted, and the themes and sub-themes were identified, achieving data saturation with no new themes emerging (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

The analysis identified four key themes and associated sub-themes:

- The first theme explored the challenges learners faced in meeting the required grades for the nursing programme. It encompassed academic, personal, and external factors that influenced their educational journeys.
- The second theme explored the impact of the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect (RCNW HCC) programme on all participants. Sub-themes included enhanced confidence and resilience, positive outcomes from practical and theoretical learning, opportunities for earning while learning, and the support and guidance provided to learners.
- The third theme focused on challenges and areas for improvement within the programme. Sub-themes highlighted the need for enhancements in both theoretical and practical aspects, better communication among stakeholders, and continuous support for learners.
- Lastly, the final theme focused on ambitions and aspirations, addressing the future goals of students and the development of the RCNW HCC programme.

Discussion

The RCNW HCC programme addresses critical challenges within the nursing profession by providing an alternative pathway for individuals who may not meet traditional academic requirements but are committed to nursing. Participants expressed gratitude for the programme, which they see as pivotal in achieving their aspirations to become nurses. The programme fosters resilience, boosts confidence, and reduces anxiety among learners, as noted by both participants and stakeholders. Practical and theoretical components of the programme prepare learners for nursing roles through hands-on experience in healthcare settings and structured university visits, bridging the gap between academic learning and practical application. Stakeholders and learners alike endorse the expansion of the RCNW HCC programme, emphasising its potential to diversify the nursing workforce and increase accessibility to nursing education across Wales. Key recommendations include improving communication among programme stakeholders, refining assessment strategies to better reflect practical learning outcomes, and continuing to support learners in their dual roles as students and HCSWs.

Conclusion

The RCNW HCC Programme for Nursing provides a supportive pathway for aspiring nurses. Evaluation indicates that the programme significantly enhances learners' resilience, confidence, and readiness for nursing roles through a blend of hands-on experience and academic learning. However, areas for improvement such as improving stakeholder communication, and providing continuous support for learners in dual roles as students and HCSWs have been identified. The programme's expansion is widely supported as a means to broaden access to nursing education in Wales, offering opportunities to individuals who may face barriers through traditional routes. Moving forward, conducting a comprehensive evaluation that integrates a realist evaluation with Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis will enhance understanding of the programme's impact and guide future developments.

1. Background

The National Health Service (NHS) is the largest public sector employer in the United Kingdom (UK) (Clark, 2023). However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of NHS staff leaving active service has been on the rise, with the risk that this could worsen in the future (Samarasekera, 2023, Kirby, 2023). In Wales, the most recent data from the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) showed that 1,370 professionals living in Wales left the NMC permanent register in 2022-2023. Although this represents a slight decrease from the previous year with 31 fewer leavers, the combined effect of these departures and the ageing workforce nearing retirement presents a troubling scenario (Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), 2023). Additionally, the estimated number of NHS full-time equivalent of nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff vacancies across Wales exceeded 2,500, resulting in a vacancy rate of 9.3% (Welsh Government, 2024). On the contrary, the number of students accepted to nursing courses across the UK has decreased. Applications from Welsh students fell by 16% in 2024 compared to 2023, with a 10% decline in applications from UK-domiciled students applying to institutions in Wales and a 6% decline in applications from Welsh-domiciled students applying for Wales and other home countries institutions (UCAS, 2024).

Therefore, in light of the declining number of students enrolling in pre-registration nursing courses at Welsh Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) established several task and finish groups. These groups were tasked with exploring strategies to attract more individuals to the nursing profession. One of the task groups focused on increasing applications, especially for the spring cohorts, which have historically drawn fewer applicants compared to the September intakes. In November 2022, the 'Increasing Numbers to Spring Cohort' task and finish group convened for the first time. This group included representatives from all HEIs across Wales as well as some Further Education (FE) colleges. During the meeting, FE college representatives highlighted that many of their students from Health and Social Care Level 3 and Access to Nursing courses who aspired to pursue pre-registration nursing at a HEI were often unsuccessful in gaining admission. The common reasons for these rejections included:

- Not meeting the entry requirements
- Lacking work experience within a health and social care setting
- Not understanding the role of the nurse
- Poor interview technique
- Poor application writing

Despite anecdotal evidence provided by college tutors, there is no concrete data to quantify the number of students who are unsuccessful in their applications. Historically, these students were directed to common foundation programmes or opted for career paths outside health and social care. Although opinions within the task group were divided regarding the creation of additional opportunities for these learners, HEIW led the development of the Royal College of Nursing Wales Healthcare Connect Programme to address these issues and engage students who had completed a Health and Social Care Level 3 or Access to Nursing qualification but need to boost their grade or gain experience before applying to study a nursing degree. Therefore, the proposed programme aims to support students who possess the values and behaviours necessary to become caring and compassionate nurses but whose initial applications were unsuccessful. The objective is to address weaknesses in these students' applications and prepare them for successful admission into a pre-registration nursing intake following the completion of a six-month programme.

The RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme offers learners a blend of activities, including paid employment as a Healthcare Support Worker (HCSW), working between 24 to 30 hours a week and also theoretical education. Learners are required to study one day per week at college to obtain their diploma, where they will complete a reflective workbook linking their practice experience with theory. To ease the transition into higher education, learners will also be required to attend university one day per month. This hybrid approach will allow students to 'earn as they learn', integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experience. The HCSW role enables learners to consolidate theoretical learning into practice, thereby enhancing their readiness for future nursing studies.

The programme currently in its pilot phase, is conducted in collaboration with the Royal College of Nursing Wales, Cardiff and Vale College, Coleg Gwent, the University of South Wales (USW), and the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board. The course spans six months. The first cohort, which included 7 learners, took place from September 2023 to March 2024. However, it is crucial to establish the impact of the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme. Hence, this study aims to evaluate the pilot hybrid bridging access programme, the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme for Nursing, which facilitates the transition from FE College/University and HCSW to undergraduate nursing programme entry.

2. Method

The study was conducted between the 1st of October 2023 and the 30th of June 2024. Ethics approval was sought and secured by the USW Faculty of Life Sciences and Education low-risk ethics panel [reference 230245LR].

A mixed methods study design including qualitative and quantitative research components was used:

- a) Focus groups (n=2) with the learners (n = 6 learners per focus group).
- b) Online semi-structured interviews with the facilitators (USW and HEIW), members from Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and clinicians (n = 6 stakeholders).
- c) Secondary analysis of the Academic Behavioural Confidence (ABC) Scale (24-item scale) focussed on student confidence in actions and plans related to their own future planned degree programme. Analysis of anonymised ABC data collected by HEIW at three time points, before the start of the programme (October 2023), at the end of the programme (March 2024) and three months post-programme (June 2024).

The first focus group was conducted in person in a USW classroom (January 2024); whereas the second was held online (March 2024). All interviews were conducted online. In relation to the ABC survey, only two students returned the ABC completed questionnaires for the quantitative element of the study; therefore these were not included in the analysis and findings.

2.1. Data Analysis

Complete, unabridged transcripts of the focus groups and interviews (5 hours of recorded interviews; 150 pages of transcript), capturing all aspects of speech including hesitations, were generated (Bloor et al., 2001). Subsequently, the data underwent thematic analysis using the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were developed to identify broader thematic patterns in the data. This method facilitated data organisation into overarching themes, allowing researchers to discern keywords and phrases that encapsulated the essence of participants' statements

(Mihas, 2023, Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding was conducted independently by the researchers, after which consensus on the primary themes was reached through discussion. The qualitative software NVivo 12 was used to support the coding process and augment the rigour of content analysis. The saturation of the data was reached as no new themes emerged.

3. Findings

The focus group consisted of 6 learners (1 male and 5 females). One student from the initial cohort withdrew in December 2023 and consequently did not participate in the two focus groups. Six online one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with facilitators from USW, and HEIW, as well as members of the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and nurses working in the same health board. These stakeholders were closely involved in the development and implementation of the programme.

Several themes and sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The first theme addressed the challenges learners encountered in attaining the grades required for admission to the nursing degree programme. This theme encompassed sub-themes related to academic, personal and external factors impacting the learners and their academic journey. The second theme explored the impact the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect (RCNW HCC) programme had on everyone involved. The sub-themes included enhanced confidence and resilience, the positive outcome from 'hands-on learning' and applied theoretical elements, the opportunity for earning while learning, and the support and guidance provided to the learners. The third theme focused on challenges and areas for improvement. The sub-themes included improvement in the theoretical and practical elements of the programme, communication among all the stakeholders, and continuous support and guidance to the learners. Lastly, the final theme focused on the ambitions and aspirations, with sub-themes encompassing the future of the students and the RCNW HCC programme as illustrated in Figure 1.

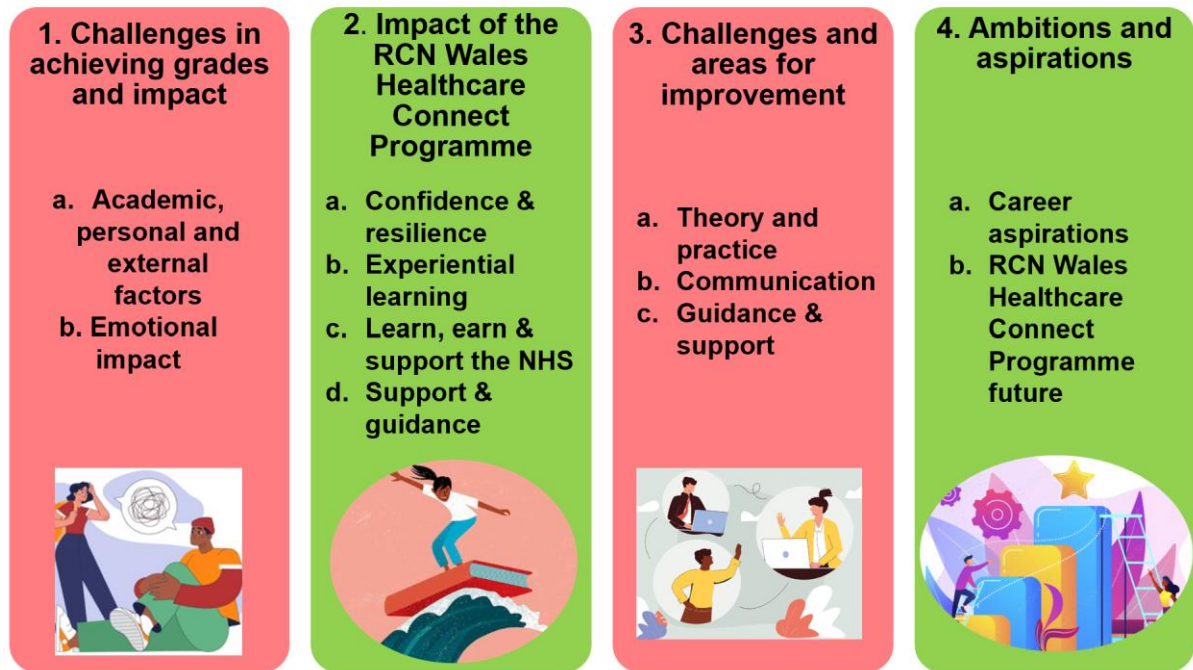


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes

3.1. Challenges in achieving grades and impact

This theme focused on the obstacles encountered by learners in attaining the grades needed to apply for an undergraduate nursing course and the impact this had on them.

3.1.1. Academic, personal and external factors

The learners explained that academic, personal and external factors impacted their results. Academic issues were prominently cited, with some learners expressing dissatisfaction with the intensity and curriculum content of their studies. One learner described the course as: "*very intense...constant like work and assignments, not to have much time for the assignments...really hard*" (L5), highlighting the overwhelming workload they felt. Another learner recounted a sudden change in the course structure: "*So it was health and social care, and then they turned around and said, and no, we're gonna change it to splitting it to do applied biology and applied psychology*" (L1). This disruption suggests a lack of clear communication and support regarding academic changes, which affected their learning continuity.

Furthermore, the impact of personal and external factors on their studies was significant. One learner mentioned the challenges of balancing coursework with

personal responsibilities, stating: *"I had a child. My grandfather passed away...other commitments, like part-time work. It was just way too much"* (L4). These personal obligations added to their stress and hindered their ability to fully engage with their studies. Another learner noted how external circumstances affected their academic path: *"...and due to many other difficulties and family commitment, I wasn't able to get the pathway I wanted"* (L3), underscoring how external pressures can shape educational outcomes.

3.1.2. Emotional impact

However, all the learners agreed that not being able to start the nursing undergraduate course left them feeling upset, scared and without a clear pathway to follow. This sense of loss and turmoil experienced by all the learners as they faced an initial setback in their journey is clearly expressed by them: *"So I was, you know, I was scared about what's gonna happen"* (L1); *"depressed"* (L3); *"very upset and I feel low on myself"* (L2).

In contrast, attending the bridging programme (RCN Wales Healthcare Connect for Nursing) provided learners with a new opportunity to refocus and regain hope in fulfilling their career aspirations. They described the programme as a miraculous lifeline, expressing sentiments such as: *"...it was like, it's like a miracle really, cause otherwise, I had no idea what to do. So it really helped me."* (L1). Other learners echoed similar sentiments, with one stating: *"...just carry on with the dream"* (L6) and another affirming: *"...it saved my life"* (L2).

3.2. Impact of the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect programme

The second theme examined the influence of the RCNW HCC programme on all participants.

3.2.1. Confidence and resilience

Participation in the programme brought about significant positive changes for learners, who reported enhanced mental strength, increased confidence, and reduced anxiety. One learner highlighted the programme's impact on their confidence and resilience,

particularly in navigating healthcare settings: *"I think it's got quite a lot of my confidence because I've never worked in healthcare before... So I think it built on like the resilience of like not giving up and just to keep going."* (L5). Another learner expressed feeling more prepared and confident due to the programme: *"But yeah, I feel much more prepared now than before, and confident. That's good."* (L4). Additionally, participants reported a sense of security and readiness for future academic pursuits, exemplified by one learner's statement: *"I have the confidence I'm going, even though I didn't even apply, but because of the bridging course, I knew like I was relaxed and safe."* (L2). Another learner succinctly summed up their state as: *"Confident and ready."* (L6).

Stakeholders similarly observed notable improvements in confidence and resilience among the learners. One stakeholder emphasised the programme's role in boosting learners' confidence as they progress into their nursing course: *"It's gonna make them so much more confident when they go into doing their course."* (S1). Other stakeholders noted significant growth in confidence and patient care skills among participants: *"...confidence has grown massively since starting."* (S4); *"to see how confident the candidate was delivering patient care...I was impressed."* (S5). Furthermore, stakeholders praised the programme for its effectiveness in building fundamental skills and confidence crucial to nursing: *"I think it's a good confidence building course and obviously they will be up to date with the fundamental skills, which I think you know obviously that's huge into nursing."* (S6). These testimonials collectively underscore the RCNW HCC programme's success in not only enhancing technical competencies but also nurturing the personal growth necessary for successful careers in healthcare.

3.2.2. Experiential learning

Learners unanimously acknowledged the dual components of the programme, theoretical knowledge gained from attending the college alongside practical exposure through university visits and the Healthcare Support Worker (HCSW) role, as pivotal in their development. Discussing the reflective theoretical elements, one learner emphasised its value in fostering introspection: *"I feel like it's nice to reflect on what you've done as well and like it's not all negative and you can kind of pick out the positives and negatives of what you've done."* (L5). Learners also emphasised the

invaluable practical experience gained through healthcare work, which significantly enhanced their preparedness for future roles. One learner noted the transformative impact of hospital work: *"I feel more prepared and ready for what's to come next."* (L2). Another learner expressed how these experiences aligned theory with practice, reinforcing their academic learning: *"More equipped, yeah. And the reflections make more sense in what we are learning in class and what we are doing in placement plus the academic side of it."* (L3). Stakeholders also affirmed the practical aspect's significance, noting its role in bridging theoretical knowledge with real-world application: *"You know when they will be taught anything in theory, they can always relate into practice."* (S5).

Equally, participants highlighted the preparatory nature of university visits. As one learner stated: *"It really helped me as well because having that once a month at the university and speaking to the lecturers who teach nursing has really helped me because they tell us from inside and what to expect, not to expect."* (L2). Additionally, a stakeholder underscored the comprehensive approach of the programme, blending higher education insights with practical application: *"They've got an idea of what's coming to university is like, and it kind of takes away that fear of coming to university and we talk about the roles of the nurse."* (S2). Overall, participants reported that the holistic approach, integrating theoretical learning with practical experiences, has equipped learners with a well-rounded foundation for their future careers in nursing.

3.2.3. Learn, earn and support the NHS

As discussed previously, the learners highlighted the positive impact of acquiring skills through hands-on experience in the hospital. However, none of the learners mentioned earning an income while studying as a benefit of the programme. In contrast, stakeholders emphasised the "win-win" aspect of earning while learning the profession. They explained that this approach also supports the NHS and local health boards by engaging HCSWs to assist nurses directly employed by the health board, thereby fostering long-term employment opportunities within the health sector. One stakeholder noted: *"So keeps them in health and social care but also allowing them to develop and earn money at the same time."* (S2). A second stakeholder emphasised the long-term benefits, stating: *"I think it's for both the health board and for the person*

is effective for both of us...The patient care is is the key element.” (S4). Another added: “It helps us because then we're developing that relationship earlier and hopefully... then come back to us, you know, or stay with us and come back to us and then that improves our retention. So it's, it's a, it's a umm, everyone wins.” (S1).

3.2.4. Support and guidance

Finally, the learners appreciated the support and guidance provided by everyone involved, particularly the close stakeholders who went beyond their roles to support the learners in their journey. One learner highlighted the responsiveness and availability of support: *“So if we do have any worries or we need a bit of clarification, they're able to help us straight away. And I think, yeah, I think that everyone's just been helpful and you know it's been quick and easy for us to get a bit more help if we need it.” (L1).* Another learner specifically praised a key supporter: *“I think that Claire has been a really good part in helping with this course. I think she is like, yeah, she's helped us all massively.” (L5).* Additionally, learners expressed gratitude for the resources and reassurance provided: *“Owain was telling us not to worry. There is like so many resources and books available to help us.” (L2).* Stakeholders also recognised the significant support provided by the staff, with one noting: *“They have quite a lot of support from Claire...I think the partner colleges have been available. I suppose they've had no more support than the normal student would have, that I'd offer anybody anyway.” (S3).*

They also recognised the mutual support they received from one another. One learner noted the close-knit nature of their group: *“I think because as a group we're quite close, so we've been able to help each other out as well.” (L1).* This sentiment was echoed by a stakeholder who observed: *“They're quite a tight-knit group, so their own peer support with each other. I think from what I can gather from what they've said, it has been invaluable.” (S2).* Another stakeholder emphasised the importance of peer support in fostering a sense of belonging: *“...having someone who you've got something in common with just helps that little bit extra to make you feel a little bit more accepted in the role.” (S1).*

3.3. Challenges and areas for improvement

The third theme focuses on areas that would require improvements or need to be addressed if the programme is expanded across Wales.

3.3.1. Theory and practice

The learners felt that, although reflective accounts are important, their number could be reduced to better reflect their practical work. One learner explained: "*I think because they did take quite a long time to get done, and especially because you know, we're working as well. It does take a lot of time to remember and for me, because I've worked in the hospital now for a year, it was quite hard to remember what I've already seen.*" (L1). Another learner shared: "*The reflections, 20 is too much to write and we have to use different models...So I think they need to reduce it to at least maybe 15 because 20 is too much.*" (L2).

Additionally, learners and stakeholders considered the day spent at the university essential but expressed the need for more practical activities, possibly in the simulation centre. One learner suggested: "*We've seen this simulation centre...Have a look around, see some other practical skill, skills you have here. So not just the PowerPoint and presenting to us.*" (L1). Another learner emphasised: "*So if we can probably add more days into university and make them live.*" (L3). Stakeholders supported this idea, with one stating: "*I think build in more simulation next time...You could build it into a Blackboard exercise. So there are lots of things we can do on the periphery so everyone gets the same experience. It's quite easy. Yeah.*" (S3). The importance of sharing learning materials across institutions was also addressed by another stakeholder who mentioned: "*So like College Gwent is coming on board hopefully in September and they were asking for assignment briefs.*" (S2).

Concerning the practical aspect, the learners highlighted the dual role they undertake as both HCSWs and learners, stressing the need for recognition within NHS settings. This status may need to be acknowledged so that the NHS staff understand the learners' pathway. One learner described the confusion they encountered: "*And because I'm not obviously just in purple like students normally are, and I'm employed*

like any other employee, I think they just assumed that I knew and I had to explain, I'm sorry, I'm a student. I'm just part of the programme... (L5). Another learner suggested practical solutions for identification: *"It can be like a polo shirt with something on there."* (L2). They further proposed: *"Even if it's like, even like a badge or something that we could have to take around and it just says like our name and then underneath like our programme or something, so at least they know that we're still a bit different because obviously, we all have badges."* (L5).

Moreover, learners and stakeholders identified that the most significant area for improvement is the implementation of standardised training that covers the basic requirements needed to fulfil the role of HCSW (i.e., manual handling, workplace harassment, etc.), along with providing access to the electronic database. One learner stated: *"Maybe an induction might be good before the placement. I think also just making sure the placements are right for everyone as well."* (L1). Another learner emphasised the necessity for better orientation: *"And I think they need to do like induction to show you around introduce you to the stuff, tell them who you are and why you are there. Because sometimes they tell you to go and get something, you don't even know where they keep it. They don't even tell you, OK, this is where we keep this..."* (L6). The importance of preparatory training was echoed by others: *"I think we could do with some like training before we actually start because when I started my placement, I had no training at all. So maybe some training beforehand probably be beneficial because I think we could get more done then."* (L5).

Stakeholders also expressed concerns about the integration of learners into the healthcare team and the adequacy of their initial training: *"I think the only thing really is that obviously they're coming in as part of the team, they only have like two weeks, supernumerary, where they're working with one member of staff, really, and then they're in our numbers. But two weeks is not a lot to get into. You know how heavy the ward is."* (S6). Another stakeholder emphasised the need for structured competency assessment: *"I'm going to treat the candidate as a brand, brand new, fresh into industry have a competency booklet."* (S5). They further elaborated on the challenges posed by transitioning to electronic records: *"So it's all electronic. So getting that, the access for doing the blood pressure and things because it's all recorded now on a laptop, it's just trying to get that access. So I don't know if there's any way that the access could*

be arranged before they start on the ward.” (S6). In addition to these challenges, stakeholders proposed enhancing the link between theoretical learning and practical application: “So maybe having some more learning outcomes that can be completed in practice so they can see themselves that what they're learning they're applying.” (S2).

3.3.2. Communication

Communication at various levels has been identified as a key area for improvement. This includes communication between the colleges and the learners about the RCNW HCC programme as an alternative path to nursing for those who were not successful in gaining the required grades to enter the nursing degree. One learner expressed frustration over the lack of proactive communication: *“So I mean, the only annoying thing is that we didn't get to have more opportunities where like the universities could have said ohh, this is something that you can do if you don't get the grades.” (L2).* Another learner emphasised the need for clarity and support: *“We could be more settled. OK, it's alright if you didn't get in because you can do this instead.” (L1).* These sentiments underscore the importance of disseminating information effectively to ensure potential candidates are aware of their options beyond traditional routes into nursing.

Furthermore, clear communication needs to be established from the programme to ward managers and subsequently to the nurses on the wards, ensuring that they are informed about the learners' backgrounds. One learner expressed frustration at the lack of understanding among ward staff about their programme: *“I think they need to make sure that all the staff on the ward we go on, I think they should explain our course to all of their staff 'cause like my manager knew, obviously where I come from. But like everyone else didn't know.” (L5).* Similarly, another learner highlighted the confusion stemming from inadequate communication: *“I stopped explaining because there's something called flexi everybody's on flexi, flexi programme and we are not that much of that flexi. The more you tell them we are Healthcare Connect, they are like what is Connect? So they are saying is flexi. So I go by the name flexi.” (L3).* Equally, learners need to be made aware of their responsibilities and commitments as HCSWs. One stakeholder emphasised the importance of this awareness: *“Yes, I think it's making*

sure they know as well that they are employed ... it's just making sure they're aware as well of their responsibilities on the board and that they are as a learner. And because although they are a learner, they are still employed, so they still need to commit to the hours, turn up for shifts." (S4).

Additionally, effective communication among all stakeholders, such as the local health boards, FE colleges, and the university, is essential for ensuring the progression of learners and addressing any issues proactively rather than reactively. Another stakeholder highlighted the need for improved communication channels: *"...regular catch-ups then with the students, with the managers, with the college. So you can try and nip any issues in the bud before they come...So you're actually being proactive rather than reactive."* (S2). Finally, enhancing communication between universities and local health boards is crucial to identifying potential candidates for enrolment in alternative nursing routes. One stakeholder stressed the importance of collaboration in this regard: *"I think we need to link in with universities more as well, just to understand how many are we talking, you know, and how many are we talking each year and each cohort how we can support them into work."* (S1). This underscores the necessity for seamless communication flows to facilitate smoother transitions and support pathways into nursing careers for aspiring learners.

3.3.3. Guidance and support

The last subtheme addressed the continuous support and guidance needed to assist the learners emphasising the necessity of a professional figure who would serve as a key reference to address challenges and provide ongoing assistance encountered by the learners or the partners. One stakeholder stressed the importance of mentoring and supervision: *"...without that, we are setting them up to fail again and that was the whole idea of the programme was we are not setting them up to fail again we are going to support them and it doesn't take much."* (S3). Another suggested the role of a buddy system for support: *"So there's like a buddy healthcare support worker that they have in work with them."* (S4). Stakeholders also pointed out the lack of a cohesive support structure: *"The college sees them regularly. They see them every Wednesday and they're in their workplace, regularly, but I guess there's not that one person that brings it all together."* (S2). Recognising the need for a formal acknowledgement of this role,

another stakeholder commented: *“I think it can fit, can fit into somebody's role...But it just needs the recognition that you are doing it.”* (S3). These insights highlight the crucial role of structured support mechanisms in ensuring the success and integration of learners in their professional development pathways.

3.4. Ambitions and Aspirations

The last theme addressed the ambitions and aspirations of the learners and stakeholders concerning their future careers and the development of the programme.

3.4.1. Career aspirations

All the learners expressed their aspirations to start the nursing undergraduate programme at university, achieve their qualifications, and pursue careers as nurses in their chosen fields. One learner envisioned their future confidently: *“I see myself being a nurse. Well, with a year's experience, so with lots of confidence and I'm comfortable where I am.”* (L1). Reflecting on the programme experience, another learner felt honoured and prepared for the journey ahead: *“I feel very honoured to be part of the course as well. I think it's helped us all massively like more than we even realise, and I feel like we're definitely more prepared to go to uni and we have each other's backs when we go to uni 'cause, we're all going.”* (L5). However, interestingly some learners decided to change their nursing field or postpone their undergraduate entry and continue working with the option of starting the flexible part-time nursing programme and becoming Registered Nurses whilst still working: *“I'm not going to university. Yeah, I'm gonna stay where I am for a year, and then I'm probably gonna go. But yeah, I feel much more prepared now than before. And confident. That's good.”* (L4).

3.4.2. RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme future

The learners and stakeholders agreed on the fact that the programme should continue to expand and be made available to everyone who has not met the grades required but who feels the vocational call to become a nurse. One learner enthusiastically anticipated the programme's growth: *“You should prepare yourself for a big a big group coming next 'cause I think everyone is going around and everybody's looking forward to joining this. This is big, big.”* (L3). Stakeholders emphasised the need for resource allocation to sustain this expansion: *“That's going to take resources. Lots of people*

are interested in it because we, if we're picking the students up that are slipping through the net, then we've got another pathway that complements the pathways we've already got into nursing.” (S3). They further highlighted the potential of the programme to diversify access into nursing: “I guess it may inform widening, different access and bringing about different routes that they don't have to detract from other routes. But just as a complement to the routes and it may encourage people into the profession, that's once thought they weren't appropriate. So it might attract different people into the profession...So I guess the potential is that it could go wider across Wales potentially and to offer the opportunity to other people.” (S1). These perspectives underscored the programme's role in broadening access to nursing education and fostering inclusivity within the profession.

4. Discussion

The nursing and midwifery staff constitute the largest occupational group in the NHS, representing more than 40% of the total workforce in NHS Wales (Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), 2023). At the same time, there are over 2,500 vacancies in NHS nursing, midwifery, and health visiting positions in Wales, equating to a vacancy rate of 9.3% along with a 16% reduction in the number of undergraduate applications in the region (Welsh Government, 2024, UCAS, 2024).

In the UK to qualify as a Registered Nurse (RN), a degree from an approved Higher Education Institution (HEI) is required. The standard is set by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) as the Regulatory Body. Full-time, distance learning and accelerated Nursing Degree programmes delivered by HEIs are available; these full-time education routes are funded by Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) and applications are made through UCAS; however, the employed route, part-time or flexible, available to current Healthcare Supporter Workers (HCSWs) employed within the NHS Wales is also available (NHS Wales, 2024). Nevertheless, it can be argued that the nursing profession goes beyond mere employment; it is widely regarded as a vocation due to its fundamental commitment to care and dedication. The core of nursing remains rooted in a long-standing tradition of providing patient care and support, driven by a vocational calling (Anwar, 2022). Furthermore, the vocational nature of nursing suggests that increasing wages or other incentives may not necessarily attract suitable candidates (Heyes, 2005). Therefore, the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect (RCNW HCC) Programme for Nursing is well-positioned to address the aforementioned issues: the need to attract more learners to pursue the nursing education pathway and become registered nurses, as well as to identify suitable candidates who are genuinely committed to the profession and aspire to work in this field. Additionally, there are many pathways to becoming a RN; however, the RCNW HCC programme is ideally placed to assist learners who, for various reasons, have not achieved the necessary grades, lack hands-on experience or have been unsuccessful at the interview stage.

The evaluation showed that learners were extremely grateful for the opportunity provided by the RCNW HCC programme, emphasising that it enabled them to pursue

their aspiration of becoming nurses. They perceived the programme as a second chance or a lifeline that supported their career goals in healthcare. Learners consistently reported enhanced resilience, increased confidence, and reduced anxiety following their involvement in the programme. Stakeholders corroborated these observations, noting significant improvements in confidence and resilience among learners and highlighting the programme's efficacy in preparing them for the demands of nursing roles. Additionally, the programme's blend of hands-on experience in healthcare settings and structured university campus visits was pivotal in shaping participants' educational journeys. This approach provided practical insights into nursing practice and academic expectations, offering participants a comprehensive understanding of nursing roles and effectively bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Both learners and stakeholders identified areas for improvement in the programme. Learners emphasised the need for adequate training before assuming roles as HCSWs and for recognition of their dual status as both students and HCSWs. This dual role suggests a requirement for clearer acknowledgement and support from NHS staff to optimise their learning and integration into clinical teams. Unlike stakeholders, learners prioritise learning while working over monetary compensation, viewing the programme as a pathway toward their goal of becoming nurses. They suggested using distinctive badges or t-shirts to signify their role as RCNW HCC students and support workers. Therefore, while training equips learners with essential skills, recognising their identity as future nurses is crucial. Stakeholders additionally suggested assessing practical skills acquired during induction and practical work in hospitals or educational institutions to further enhance development. Communication within the programme requires improvement to ensure clarity of roles among learners, ward managers, and nursing staff, as well as to enhance collaboration between educational partners such as FE colleges, universities and local health boards. Continuous support through supervision, mentoring, and regular meetings is considered essential for effectively integrating educational and workplace experiences and ensuring overall success. This should be a dedicated role.

Finally, learners see themselves progressing to university, obtaining nursing qualifications, and working confidently in their chosen fields. Several participants

expressed the significant impact of the programme on their preparedness and confidence for university life. Stakeholders and learners unanimously agreed on the importance of expanding the RCNW HCC programme to accommodate individuals who have not met the traditional academic requirements but have a strong vocational call to nursing. They emphasised the need for resources to support this expansion, viewing it as a complementary pathway that can attract a diverse range of candidates into the nursing profession. Everyone agreed that the programme expansion has the potential to widen access to nursing education across Wales, providing new opportunities for those who might otherwise be excluded from traditional routes.

Unfortunately, the Academic Behavioural Confidence (ABC) Scale surveys received only a limited number of responses, which hindered a thorough data analysis. Additionally, lecturers at FE colleges were not interviewed, which could have provided different insights. Moving forward, it would be beneficial to longitudinally follow the initial cohort throughout their academic journey, including scheduling further focus groups at the end of their first year and potentially upon graduation from their nursing programme. Furthermore, conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme for Nursing, integrating a realist evaluation with Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis and contingent evaluation will enhance understanding of the programme's impact and guide future developments. Critically reviewing the quantitative scales used and the data collection process is also advisable.

5. Conclusion

The RCN Wales Healthcare Connect Programme for Nursing addresses critical challenges in nursing education and workforce development in Wales. While the programme has shown significant benefits, including enhanced practical and academic preparation, areas for improvement such as enhanced training, clearer communication, and broader stakeholder involvement have been identified. Moving forward, a comprehensive evaluation incorporating a realist evaluation integrated with social return on investment (SROI) analysis will further elucidate the programme's impact and inform future developments.

6. Recommendations

- **Improve Communication:** Strengthen communication among learners, stakeholders (including ward managers and nursing staff), and educational partners (such as FE colleges and universities) to ensure a clear understanding of roles, responsibilities, and learning objectives. Facilitate the sharing of teaching materials and assessments to enhance collaboration and efficiency.
- **Enhance Continuous Support:** Designate an individual responsible for overseeing the programme's delivery. Establish dedicated supervision, mentoring, and regular oversight mechanisms to support learners in their dual roles as students and Healthcare Support Workers (HCSWs), enhancing their integration into clinical teams and academic environments.
- **HCSW Role, Requirements, Assessment:** Recognise and support learners' identity as aspiring nurses and HCSWs within NHS settings. Ensure they receive appropriate training before starting the HCSW role and provide clear identification of their dual roles such as issuing a badge with the programme name. Integrate practical assessments with coursework through a competency booklet. This will clarify their roles and optimise their learning pathway.
- **Review Reflective Assignments:** Consider reducing the number of reflective tasks to around 15 from the current 20 to better align with practical learning needs and improve efficiency in documenting experiences.
- **Enhance Practical Activities:** Increase practical activities during monthly university days, particularly through simulation exercises, to provide more hands-on learning opportunities essential for nursing practice.
- **Promote Programme Awareness:** Increase visibility and early promotion of the RCNW HCC programme among potential applicants, including proactive outreach to students before they receive their results or upon receiving rejection letters, to broaden access to nursing education opportunities.
- **Expand Programme:** Secure resources and support for expanding the RCNW HCC programme to accommodate individuals with a strong vocational interest in nursing who may not meet traditional academic requirements, thereby diversifying the nursing profession in Wales and providing new educational pathways.
- **Evaluation Moving Forward:** Track the first cohort throughout their academic progression, conducting additional focus groups at the conclusion of their first academic year and possibly upon completion of their nursing degree.

Additionally, conducting a comprehensive evaluation that includes a realist evaluation with Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis will enhance understanding of the programme's impact and guide future developments. Reviewing the quantitative scales used and the data collection process is also advisable.

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