



# **Studying for your Nursing Degree**

**CRITICAL  
STUDY SKILLS**

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# Chapter 1

## Studying nursing in higher education

### Learning outcomes



After reading this chapter you will:

- have gained knowledge of higher education and its place in the UK education system;
- understand some of the terminology and 'jargon' used in higher education;
- have gained knowledge of institutions which set standards for nursing education;
- have gained knowledge of levels and qualifications in nursing;
- understand the relevance and importance of lifelong learning and continuing professional development;
- understand the importance of student autonomy and independent learning in universities;
- have gained knowledge of how courses are structured and delivered.

This chapter will develop your knowledge and understanding of the study of nursing in UK universities. It will outline the 'qualification frameworks' that are relevant to becoming, and developing as, a nurse, and discuss the role of important educational and professional bodies. In addition, you will be introduced to the types of teaching and learning that you will encounter as a student nurse.

Before you read the chapter, test your knowledge with the Quick quiz below. You can revisit the quiz as you read, or come back to it after reading the whole chapter to see if your answers have changed. Key words in this chapter are highlighted in **bold** and can be found in the glossary in the Appendix.

CROSS  
REFERENCE

Appendix,  
The language  
of higher  
education

### Quick quiz



- 1) What does HE stand for?
- 2) How is HE different from FE?
- 3) What are the main qualifications offered by universities?
- 4) Which is the higher level qualification, a *degree* or a *diploma*?
- 5) What is the minimum academic qualification you need to become a registered nurse?
- 6) What mark (percentage) do you usually need to obtain a *first-class* degree?
- 7) What are 'credits' and how can you get them?
- 8) What do you think 'Accreditation of Prior Learning' might be?
- 9) What is 'lifelong learning'?
- 10) What are the most common types of assessment in universities?

## What is HE?

**HE** stands for '**higher education**', one of two options in UK **tertiary education**, ie education available to people of 16 years or above.

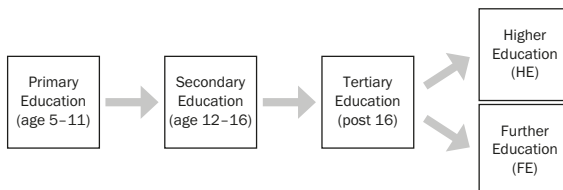


Figure 1.1: The UK education system

HE is mainly provided by universities, and principally awards **degrees** and **diplomas**. In contrast, **further education (FE)** is provided by colleges, which deliver courses and award qualifications which are **vocational** in nature (NVQs; City & Guilds; BTEC), preparing people directly for the workplace. However, in recent years, there has been a blurring of the line between the two types of institution, with many FE colleges, sometimes in association with partner universities, also offering degrees. This is one way of making degrees accessible to a wider range of people, some of whom may find it convenient to attend classes in a local FE college or to study in the evenings. Recently introduced 'degree apprenticeships', which offer the potential to obtain a degree while learning on the job, also blur the boundaries between vocational and academic learning.

## Your nursing degree

Nursing and midwifery in the UK are today fully integrated into the HE sector. Although there is a large vocational component to these subjects, based on practical and clinical skills, they also require highly developed intellectual skills, and universities are considered to be the best place for students to acquire and develop these. Nursing is thus an academic subject, equivalent to any other, such as medicine, engineering or English literature, and therefore measured against the same standards.

### Qualification frameworks

HE qualifications, sometimes called 'academic awards', are regulated across the UK via two frameworks: the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (QAA, 2008), and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland (QAA, 2014). These frameworks help institutions and employers judge the value of an individual's education and help ensure equity between academic subjects. [Table 1.1](#) shows the academic levels assigned by the QAA to each stage of HE, and provides information on how they relate to a study pathway in nursing.

**Table 1.1: An overview of academic levels in relation to nursing study in HE**

UNDERGRADUATE STUDY			
England, Wales, Northern Ireland	Scotland	Award	Notes
Level 4	Level 7	Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)	
Level 5	Level 8	Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) Foundation Degree (FdD)	Up until 2010, minimum academic qualification for nurses
Level 6	Level 9	Ordinary Bachelor's Degree eg BSc Nursing	Minimum academic qualification for nurses and midwives; common exit point in Scotland
	Level 10	Bachelor's Degree with Honours eg BSc (Hons) in Nursing Studies, BNurs (Hons), BMidwif (Hons)	Usual academic qualification for nurses and midwives in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

**Table 1.1: (cont.)**

POSTGRADUATE STUDY			
Level 7	Level 11	Master's Degree eg MSc, MA, MPhil Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma (PGCert; PGDip)	Minimum academic qualification for Advanced Practitioners
Level 8	Level 12	Research Doctorate (PhD) Professional Doctorate eg DNurs, MD, ClinPsychD	Recommended qualification for Advanced Practitioners who are Nurse Consultants

An undergraduate degree has four classifications. These are shown in [Table 1.2](#), along with the marks usually required at each level.

**Table 1.2: Bachelor's degree classifications and typical required marks**

CLASSIFICATION	MARKS REQUIRED
1st	Above 70%
2:1	60–69%
2:2	50–59%
3rd	40–49%
Fail	Below 40%

CROSS  
REFERENCE

Chapter 6,  
Assessment

## Courses and credits

You can see from [Table 1.1](#) that, in order to enter the nursing profession, you must obtain a degree from an HE institution, usually a university. If you study full time, it will take three years to obtain an honours degree (or four years in Scotland). However, universities recognise that this timescale is not possible or ideal for many people, so they have flexible learning systems which allow students to fit study into their lives in a practical way.

This can involve:

- **distance learning**, where the student mainly studies from home via correspondence, using web-based resources – perhaps occasionally attending university workshops etc;
- **blended learning**, which combines traditional classroom study and web-based learning;
- **part-time study** (including the new degree apprenticeships mentioned earlier).

Flexible learning is facilitated by the **credit** points system which underpins HE education. Each course **module** that you study has a number of credit points attached to it. Each credit is equal to 10 hours of study, either in class, or through self-study (QAA, 2008, 2014). These credit points build up to eventually form your degree, whether over three years' full-time study, or over a longer period if you study part time. [Table 1.3](#) shows that a student has to earn 360 credit points in order to be awarded an honours degree.

**Table 1.3: HE qualifications in relation to credit points**

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATION	CREDIT POINTS REQUIRED
CertHE	120 at Level 4 (Scotland Level 7)
DipHE	120 at Level 4 (Scotland Level 7) + 120 at Level 5 (Scotland Level 8)
Degree with Honours (Ordinary Degree in Scotland)	120 at Level 4 (Scotland Level 7) + 120 at Level 5 (Scotland Level 8) + 120 at Level 6 (Scotland Level 9)

Look at the QAA frameworks (2008, 2014) online to see descriptors detailing exactly what is expected of a student at each level. Note that not all universities offer the CertHE. Some universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland may offer an ordinary degree without honours to students who have obtained a certain number of credits at Level 6. A four-year Scottish Honours Degree requires an additional 120 credits at Level 9/10.

Universities provide students with information on each module with regard to its academic level and the number of credit points it carries. Many modules, often called 'core modules', will be obligatory; some modules will be optional. All modules are organised around the following:

- a set of **learning outcomes** which identify what you will be able to do or understand by the end of the course;
- a process of **teaching and learning** which will help you achieve the learning outcomes;
- **assessment** which will measure your achievement and provide evidence of it.

## Top tips



### Thinking about 'the big picture'

Learning outcomes, teaching and learning, and assessment will be aligned, so you should think about 'the big picture' and consider them together. When preparing for assessments, for example, look again at the learning outcomes to check what you will be expected to demonstrate. In class, think about how the classroom activities are partly preparing you for assessment, and ask if you are not sure.

## CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 3,  
Becoming a  
member of your  
academic and  
professional  
community,  
Reflective  
practice

## Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

Credit points can sometimes be assigned for prior learning or experience, through a process known as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). There are two branches of APL:

- 1) Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) allows you to transfer any credit points you already hold from one institution to another. One example of this is when English registered nurses holding only a diploma (having qualified before 2010) decide to 'top up' to an honours degree by completing 120 credit points at Level 6.
- 2) Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) allows you to acquire credit points for your practical or professional experience, provided that it meets the academic standards demanded by the university involved. To support an application for APEL, a university will often require a **portfolio** of evidence, ie a reflective account (usually written) of your learning experiences.

While this transfer system allows for flexibility in HE, note that it can often be a very complicated process, with institutions sometimes disagreeing on the transfer values of particular modules.

## CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 6,  
Assessment,  
Portfolios

## Reflection



- List examples of your own practical or professional experience which you think would be valid in terms of APEL, along with examples of evidence you could provide as support. (An example is provided.)

EXPERIENCE	SUPPORT
managed a team of nursing assistants	written reflection outlining the management skills I demonstrated; feedback from colleagues, including those who I managed; analysis of the strengths and areas for development in my management style

## Lifelong learning and continuous professional development

The flexible approach to study outlined above is underpinned by the much-valued educational principle of **lifelong learning**. Lifelong learning, by definition, extends beyond your degree, and may involve postgraduate study or general professional development. If you are a registered nurse with a degree or diploma, lifelong learning may involve taking post-registration modules, sometimes called ‘standalone modules’, which are offered by many universities. These could help you top up a diploma to an honours degree, or, if you already have a degree, they could help you generally in your **continuing professional development (CPD)**.

CPD in nursing is regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). This body specifies the amount of professional training and updating that should be undertaken by practising nurses and midwives via a process known as ‘revalidation’. Currently, this is prescribed as 35 hours of CPD in a three-year period, at least 20 hours of which must be ‘participatory learning’, that is, learning activity involving interaction with other health professionals.

### Case study



- How is CPD demonstrated in the personal account below?

“I am a nurse and a member of the military, and I’ve been a nursing lecturer for 20 years. I think moving between a clinical setting and a classroom setting was very good for developing my professional skills. During that time, I applied skills from the clinical setting to the classroom setting, and in the classroom, I was able to develop some skills around confidence and critical thinking to apply in a clinical setting. In order to advance in the military, I also had to do training, particularly related to good discipline. Now I am pursuing my PhD in nursing, so that means I will develop as a scholar. During the process of studying for my PhD, I feel like I can develop my professional skills and become a complete nursing scholar when I go back home to Thailand. I need to learn more and search for new knowledge in order to be innovative in nursing. No one is too old to learn. Actually, my mom is a nurse, and now she’s 70 years old, and she likes to learn new things about nursing using her smartphone and the internet. She’s particularly interested about care for the elderly because she herself is trying to find ways to be independent in later life.”

Senior military nurse and University of Manchester PhD student

### Reflection



What do you think your priorities in terms of CPD will be when you qualify as a registered nurse?

## Being a university student

### Reflection



- What is your previous experience of study? Which of the following have you experienced? Was your experience positive or negative? Why was this?
  - 1) Big classes where the teacher talks a lot and the class mostly listens
  - 2) Large lectures with hundreds of students
  - 3) Small seminar groups where people discuss topics or articles
  - 4) One-to-one tutorials with a teacher

University culture and practices may not always reflect your past educational experiences. Some students may find it difficult to work things out at first.

### Case studies



- Do you think these students have a good understanding of what is expected of them at university level? What advice would you give them?
  - 1) “My course looks quite easy – there aren’t many lectures and I don’t have to hand in any essays until the end of the semester. So it looks like I’ll have a lot of free time!”
  - 2) “The lecturer puts some things on Blackboard after the lecture, but I’m not very confident with technical stuff so I haven’t seen it.”
  - 3) “It doesn’t matter if I miss lectures – I can get all the information I need from reading textbooks.”
  - 4) “I’m very nervous about speaking in front of people so I tend to keep my head down in seminars and just get through them without drawing attention to myself.”
  - 5) “I’m disappointed in my essay mark and don’t understand what I did wrong – I worked really hard on it! But there’s nothing I can do about it now. Maybe I’m just not cut out for this.”

The students quoted above have some common misunderstandings about university life. These areas of confusion are dealt with in the following sections, to demonstrate, among other things, how study is not just about the time you spend in the classroom, why it is important to go to lectures, when and how you should seek support from academic staff, and why, sometimes, you might just need to push yourself beyond your comfort zone in order to achieve your full potential!

### Study time

At university, you will encounter a range of teaching and learning methods, including those which involve face-to-face contact with academic staff, ie **lectures**, **seminars** and **tutorials**. However, you may find that there seems to be a lot of ‘free’ time on your timetable. Hence, it is important to understand that the time you spend with your lecturers is only a small part of your study. A 10-credit module is seen to represent approximately 100 hours of actual work (QAA, 2008, 2014). So if you attend, say, 30 hours of lectures on a particular 10-credit module, this still leaves 70 study hours of study to complete outside the classroom. This may involve searching the library, reading, planning and writing essays, improving your computer skills, or collaborating with other students on a group project.

#### CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 2,  
Strategies  
for effective  
learning



**Top tips****Getting the most from your study time**

Try thinking of your full-time studies as a typical 'working week' of about 35–40 hours a week, 7–8 hours a day, and plan your time accordingly. (Adapt this if you are studying part time.) Take sensible breaks throughout the day, just as you would if you were working – maybe cook a nice healthy lunch to give you energy, or take the dog for a walk to give your brain some much-needed downtime!

**Virtual Learning Environments**

Study outside the classroom is often facilitated by Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) such as **Blackboard** or **Moodle**. VLEs contain vital information on the course and links to useful resources. They also host a number of useful tools. For example, VLE discussion boards can enable interaction with your peers and with the lecturers. VLEs are also important in terms of assessment: you may be required to complete some assessment tasks online, and you will probably be required to upload written assignments onto your VLE using plagiarism-detection software such as **Turnitin**, which compares your writing with published sources and other submitted essays to ensure it is all your own work. You may also receive assessment feedback online.

**Top tips****Getting the most from your VLE**

- 1) Check your VLE frequently as there may be new announcements or documents. Staff will just assume that you will look at these; they will not chase you up to make sure you've accessed them. It is your responsibility to be on top of things.
- 2) Spend some time learning how to navigate the site so that you can access things quickly when you need them. The more you use the site, the easier this will get.
- 3) Read your discussion board contributions carefully before clicking 'send'. Make sure that the style is appropriately polite and that there is no ambiguity – especially if it could cause offence. Also check your grammar and punctuation – poor writing can detract from the seriousness of your message.
- 4) Check if it's possible to download slides before lectures – this could help you to be more prepared for lectures, and facilitate the note-taking process.

**Lectures**

Lectures at university are designed to provide an overview of a topic. As such, they are a very useful starting point. They are also a springboard for further reading, thinking, discussion and writing. The aim of lectures is not just to reproduce what is in the books: the lecturer can guide you towards the most important aspects of a topic, or provide you with a theoretical framework on which to 'hang' the ideas you accumulate from your reading. They may direct you towards particular chapters in textbooks or indicate how different journal articles relate to the topic, as well as each other. Lectures can also be enjoyable! A lecturer may present you with interesting examples, or offer up lively anecdotes which can bring a subject to life. Some lecturers may include interactive activities, for example, getting you to use mobile phone apps or 'clickers' (a device used to provide on-the-spot analysis of students' responses during a lecture), or they may encourage comments and questions.



## Top tips

### Getting the most from lectures

- 1) Experiment with different note-taking strategies: linear notes, mind maps, diagrams etc.
- 2) Use headings and sub-headings to organise your notes, or use colour to highlight thematic patterns.
- 3) Experiment with taking hand-written notes and using your laptop or tablet to see which suits you best.
- 4) Put together a list of useful abbreviations and get into the habit of using them. Some common ones are listed below. Match them to the full term (as with the example that has been given) to check your understanding:
 

eg	}	that is to say
NB	}	compare and contrast
cf	}	for example
ie	}	note
- 5) If you find it difficult to keep up in lectures, ask if the lecturer is willing to upload the lecture slides onto the VLE beforehand, so that you can do some preparation and maybe check out some difficult terminology beforehand. If the slides are available, you could upload them onto your laptop or tablet and annotate them as you follow the lecture.
- 6) Go over your notes as soon as possible after the lecture, when it is fresh in your mind. Improve the organisation if you can, adding or refining headings, sub-headings and cross references – this is easier of course with typed notes.
- 7) Find a lecture 'buddy' who you can discuss the lecture with afterwards. You could check if you agree on what the main points are, or try to clarify anything you were confused about.
- 8) Look back at previous lecture notes before attending the next one.

## Seminars

On some courses, small seminar groups will provide an opportunity for you to follow up on the lecture, to clarify points and expand your understanding. You may be asked to read an article beforehand, and one or two students may be asked to lead the seminar by presenting their summary and opinion of the article, before a general group discussion.

It can be difficult to contribute in seminars: for some people it is rather nerve-wracking; many find it hard to interject – particularly if there are some dominant personalities (maybe yours!) in the room. But remember you are all in the same boat – you all have your strengths and weaknesses, you all have something to learn – and the lecturer is there to bring out the best in you, not put you on the spot!



## Top tips

### Getting the most from seminars

- 1) Be prepared. Think about two or three points you would like to make, and think about how you might express them.
- 2) Say something early on in the seminar if you can. Once you take the plunge and contribute, the second time will be much easier.
- 3) Use seminars as an opportunity to 'talk through' and test ideas that you are exploring. This can often be a good way of preparing for an essay.
- 4) Don't be afraid to ask for clarification – if you haven't understood something, then there is a good chance that others haven't either!
- 5) Be prepared to provide clarification yourself. It is often necessary to reconsider the way we express ourselves in order to achieve clarity; this reformulation process is also a way of helping us to understand if we have truly grasped an idea.