

Dr. Ivor Burton,  
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Bedford College.

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Dear Ivor:

re: the future of nursing studies.

It will not come as a total surprise to you to know how deeply disturbed I feel at the news revealed at last Friday's extraordinary departmental meeting. The likely, most immediate implication of a move of Bedford College out to Egham for the sociology department is the jettisoning of nursing studies, a course which as yet has hardly seen the light of the day.

I fully understand your support of such a move which might well save the job of most of my colleagues. I am also aware of nursing studies' relative weak power position within the department which must colour its perspective. And it is precisely because of such reflections that I am putting pen to paper to outline some considerations in relation to nursing studies' possible development.

The UGC letter had titled the development of nursing studies at Bedford College as a 'new (academic) initiative' requiring protection. SARC recommended that whilst the notion of a new initiative should be dispensed with, nursing studies should be considered under the tutelage of social administration, likewise requiring protection. Now, however, the tables have turned.

1) present position:

The suggestion is that nursing studies, as the only undergraduate course, is to remain on the Bedford site together with medical sociology and social work both of which are involved with post-graduate work while the rest of the entire college moves out to Egham. This would leave the nursing studies course small, isolated, narrow in conception and consequently particularly vulnerable.

2) precariousness of nursing studies:

To understand the precariousness of nursing studies a brief explanation about its peculiarities. They come about partly because academic nursing is as yet poorly developed and hardly established and partly because of its strong and essential involvement with clinical placements which on the whole is not a usual practice for university courses. Because 'reading nursing' at university is so new a concept, students opting for its degree have not yet learned to discern the varying merits of different nursing studies courses. Criteria for deciding which particular course to join is made primarily on the basis of finding a happy, active and versatile student body. There exist plenty of other opportunities to become a nurse. All one needs to do is to apply for training at a recognised main hospital. But it is because potential student nurses wish to become nursing students reading for a degree that they look for one where they can become corporate members of a university to share the joys, pleasures and agonies of study with other undergraduates. Again and again at interviews three main questions crystallize: one relates to the variety of student life and to its social connotations whilst another relates to the classroom-mix with other types of students. The third question addresses itself to the nature of the integration of the course between that of the hospital and of the university. The nursing student candidate seems to be a person gregarious for heterogenic company both at academic and at social level. Interestingly enough, it is of course this very heterogeneity which is basic to nursing. Its very activity encapsulates a vast number of well integrated skills and knowledge.

and the existence of a well-established course.

3) Bedford College nursing studies course:

As a result of these considerations the nursing studies' course at Bedford College was devised accordingly. Nursing is a heterogenic social activity requiring different sources of knowledge. The final result, the integration of such knowledge is to be brought to bear ultimately on nursing's central concern, the care of the patient. The sociological department at Bedford College is because of its particular heterogenic constellation ideally suited not only to be sponsoring such a course but also to be involved in its teaching and research activity which go beyond the confines of those of medical sociology. All of the courses taught in the department are of the utmost relevance to nursing studies. Sociology in particular is central to nursing as it provides its practitioners not only with a theoretical framework necessary to understand its practice. It also becomes the source for developing a sociological framework for patient care. This double function makes it indispensable for the nursing course as it provides for it an interlocking, integral link across all other areas of knowledge. Therefore it is ideally suited to function as a potential research tool. A number of individual members in the department have declared an interest in teaching the nursing students and in considering related research projects. In this way and through this method students of the sociology department and those of the nursing studies will be able to form links of friendships necessary to develop a common identity of all being undergraduates together.

This small developing course is now to be plucked from its germinator, left to its own devices at Bedford College site as an undergraduate course. Despite the fact that medical sociology and social work will be on the same site, nursing students will find it difficult to identify with those departments. Undergraduate students and post-graduates have little in common, at least during the early years. I understand that intercollegiate service teaching is to take place on the Bedford site. This can only be seen as a remedial exercise and will not substitute for substance. The remaining course, small and vulnerable as it is, isolated from the main college activities will become necessarily narrower in outlook, displaying the constraints of a mono-culture. It will be difficult if not impossible to keep up student numbers and to entice further student application to sustain the course. Its maintenance will loose out in competition with other nursing studies courses infinitely better placed for an active integral student life.

4) staff of nursing studies:

What of its staff? In exactly the same way as students require collegiate intercourse for their intellectual and emotional development, so does the staff. They too, for their own development require academic stimulation and cross-cultural fertilisation. The person I had in mind for the third post in nursing studies expressed an interest precisely because of the link between sociology and nursing studies which she herself wants to foster and to develop. A forced isolation of the course away from its progenitor will prejudice its intellectual development and will therefore be unable to attract stimulating and exciting staff.

5) library facilities:

What about library facilities? The bulk of the library will move out to Egham leaving the newly developed nursing section at Bedford. This is far too scanty a library and provides only a very narrow professional outlook for a course which requires most of all a breadth of vision, an idea which must have been in the minds of those who termed the development of nursing studies a 'new (academic) initiative'!

6) immediate concern:

You commented that the course should never have been started given the College's fiscal state. But the fact is that it has commenced and that the

(preserved)

university has made a commitment to both staff and students to develop a new undergraduate course in nursing studies. The UGC letter suggested that it should be protected. When at the last SAC's meeting a member suggested that because Bedford College's resources were being cut back, nursing studies should be dispensed with, the meeting resolved that Bedford should find the resources to provide the course as planned for there was need for the development of many different types of nursing studies courses.

7)reconstruction:

I wonder, whether when Bedford College's reconstruction at Egham is being considered, space could also be found for the nursing course. Around the area within 20-30 miles radius are the ~~xxx~~ towns of Reading, Windsor, Slough, Staines and others. Some of these may well have hospitals accredited by the General Nursing Council for nurse training. If one were to buy a minibus and had two drivers at one's disposal nursing students could be ferried regularly from the campus to the clinical placements and back. Students' accomodation would have to be provided for anyhow, and luckily the nursing course takes only up to twelve students. For this to develop one requires a member of staff to make appropriate enquiries and to enter into planning negotiations. This is a long-term process and needs to be planned with care and consideration. At the moment the course is being serviced by a part-time secretary. The work is building up fast with subsequent intakes for which a part-time secretary is no longer sufficient.

Failing this, I think nursing studies needs to find a home in some college which has a similar constellation as the Bedford department, because this is the base of the present course. As far as I know, there are only two other such departments within the London university. One is at the LSE and the other at Goldsmith College. In both these institutions the students would find undergraduate colleagues and a similar amalgam of social studies which can provide the framework of nursing studies.

I would appreciate an opportunity to discuss these issues with you before we explore them in the nursing studies working group.

Yours sincerely

Monica

(Ferguson)