

Digital immersive environments can improve student retention

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The strenuous academic and professional journey that nursing students' traverse can exert immense pressure, often resulting in attrition. The inherent challenges encompass a spectrum from socioeconomic concerns to physical and mental health issues. The strategies universities employ from the inception of a student's academic journey may therefore considerably affect the likelihood of retention on the course and in the subsequent professional role.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (2023) reported a modest decrease of 1.4% in the number of people leaving the nursing profession. However, more than half (52%) left prematurely, with most expressing a low probability of returning. The main reasons cited were burnout, exhaustion, lack of support from colleagues, concerns over the quality of care, and workload and staffing levels. In response, NHS England (2022) suggested comprehensive support packages that focus on the wellbeing needs of young healthcare workers in their initial year of service.

A holistic approach that incorporates academic support, nurturing work environments and personal wellbeing measures is indispensable to student success. In this transformative era marked by technological advancements, digital technologies hold the potential to redefine learning spaces and student support systems. These innovative platforms facilitate the creation of immersive, student-centred environments and promote enhanced wellbeing. They allow for the personalisation of learning experiences, which can stimulate engagement, improve learning outcomes and potentially decrease attrition among nursing students. These technologies mark a promising shift towards a more inclusive and supportive education system, offering the healthcare sector a wealth of possibilities.

Immersive environments stand as a unique classification of technology, whereby users are involved in a multisensory experience, concurrently leveraging multiple technologies. These environments are under research for their potential in therapeutic interventions. A study conducted between 2019 and 2022 designed a therapeutic intervention called *The Timeline* (Bruce et al, 2022) within an immersive setting. A subsequent study, supported by NHS England, is currently under way to co-design and test *The WISE Room* (the acronym translates as 'wellbeing in student education', indicating the purpose and potential of this endeavour).

The impact of digital immersive environments on student nurse retention and wellbeing is a promising area of exploration. Whether these systems become a staple in nursing education remains to be seen. However, they incite critical questions: What value do they bring? How effective are they? What palpable difference can they make on the ground?

Digital immersive environments offer unique advantages. They provide an alternate reality wherein students can learn, practise and make mistakes without real-world repercussions. They are also multi-inclusive spaces where students can access features and tools with less pressure to support their needs. Moreover, these environments can be tailored to individual needs, providing an experience that may enhance engagement and reduce stress. The development of digital immersive environments, such as The Timeline and The WISE Room, exemplify how technology can be harnessed to support students' wellbeing, potentially improving retention. Only more rigorous and extensive trials can determine the true efficacy of these interventions.

To conclude, the role of immersive environments in student nurse retention sits within a compelling and evolving field, namely human computer interaction, rising to current challenges in digital health care. These unique multisensory settings, supported by cutting-edge, enabling hardware and software, have the potential to revolutionise nursing education, facilitate student wellbeing and enhance retention rates by providing experiences that are attuned to student needs. Ongoing research and continual assessment are vital to realise the full potential and optimise the impact of these technologies. The journey ahead may be arduous and complex, but the objective – to support the wellbeing and success of our future nurses – is undoubtedly worth pursuing.