

Navigating the new NMC Standards for SCPHN School Nursing education



The 2022 NMC Standards for specialist community public health nurses (SCPHN) are leading to substantial changes to SCPHN education programmes from September this year. In the first of a new regular column on education by the National Forum of School Health Educators, Melanie Hayward explains the changes and the challenges, but also why overall these constitute a positive step forward.

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In the ever-evolving field of healthcare, educational standards and professional qualifications play a critical role in ensuring that practitioners are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide high-quality care. In 2022, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) published its updated standards for specialist community public health nurses (SCPHN), which includes significant changes affecting SCPHN School Nursing education. Since their release, SCPHN academics in universities across the UK have been actively updating their SCPHN School Nursing programmes in readiness for delivery from September 2024.

As the UK National Forum of School Health Educators (NFSHE) chair, I want to address some of these changes and their implications for the SCPHN readers and the broader community of child and young people practitioners.

Understanding the NMC changes

The NMC's updated standards, notably the Part 3 Standards for post-registration

programmes (NMC, 2024a) and the Standards of Proficiency for Specialist Community Public Health Nurses (NMC, 2024b) introduce several key changes to the SCPHN education framework. These updates reflect the NMC's commitment to ensuring that post-registration education remains relevant and rigorous, preparing practitioners for the complex and evolving demands of children and young people's public health nursing. Here are some of the significant changes:

Enhanced knowledge, skills and behaviours

The updated standards emphasise an increased holistic approach to health, integrating physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing considerations. There is a stronger focus on cultural competence and the ability to work effectively with diverse populations. Practitioners are also expected to be proficient in using digital health technologies and data analytics to improve public health outcomes for children and young people.

Greater emphasis on leadership and advocacy

The updated standards stress the importance of leadership in public health nursing, preparing practitioners to take on strategic roles within their organisations and communities. There is also a significant focus on the role of SCPHNs as advocates for public health, empowering communities and influencing health policy.

Increased importance of interprofessional collaboration

The updated standards highlight the importance of working collaboratively with other healthcare professionals and sectors to provide comprehensive care. Practitioners are also encouraged to engage more actively with community stakeholders to address children and young people's public health challenges.

Move of levels

One of the biggest changes universities have had to be conversant of when updating their programmes is the move from first degree to postgraduate degree

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levels of study. Existing programmes written against the NMC (2004) Standards of Proficiency for Specialist Community Public Health Nurses programmes were written to Standard 5 which stated:

'The minimum academic standard of specialist community public health programmes [are] that of a first degree' (NMC, 2004:15).

The new Standard 5.1 states:

'that the minimum academic level for SCPHN ... is ... postgraduate masters' level'. (NMC, 2024a)

The rationalisation for this change is clear:

- **Depth and specialisation:** postgraduate master's level education requires a deeper engagement with specialised knowledge, advanced research skills and critical thinking
- **Professional development:** qualified SCPHNs will be better prepared for leadership roles and be able to contribute more significantly to the development and delivery of public health services
- **Career advancement:** postgraduate master's level qualifications enhance career prospects by demonstrating higher expertise and specialisation.

FAQ: The move from Level 6 to Level 7

Due to demand and to support our 0–19 public health services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, NFSHE created a FAQ document that provides detailed explanations of the transition from Level 6 to Level 7 (first-degree and postgraduate degree levels in these countries) and its implications for prospective students and current practitioners. Here are some of the key points we covered:

- **Qualifications and entry requirements:** Level 7 qualifications generally require a relevant undergraduate degree (typically a 2:2 or above) or significant professional experience
- **Study depth and duration:** Level 7 study involves a more in-depth exploration of specialised topics and typically takes one year full-time or two years part-time for a master's degree

- **Career impact:** Level 7 qualifications enhance career prospects by demonstrating advanced knowledge and research skills.

For more detailed information, or if you would like our comprehensive FAQ document, which addresses many of the common questions and concerns about this transition to Level 7 education, you can access it on the SAPHNA website here: <https://saphna.co/news/faq-the-move-from-level-6-to-level-7-scpnh-qualification/>

Positive points and challenges of the NMC changes

The shift to the postgraduate level and the broader updates to the NMC standards bring numerous benefits, both for individual practitioners and the public health sector as a whole:

- **Higher standards of care:** by requiring a more advanced level of study, the NMC ensures that SCPHN practitioners have a deeper understanding of their field, which can translate into higher standards of care and better health outcomes
- **Enhanced professionalism:** postgraduate qualifications foster a higher degree of professionalism among SCPHN practitioners, equipping them with the skills necessary to lead and innovate within their roles
- **Alignment with global standards:** many countries already require postgraduate qualifications for similar roles, and this change helps align UK standards with international best practices, facilitating better global collaboration and recognition
- **Leadership and advocacy:** the emphasis on leadership and advocacy prepares practitioners to influence health policy and drive public health initiatives effectively

While the benefits are significant, the changes do present some challenges:

- **Accessibility and inclusivity:** ensuring that the move to higher-level study does not create barriers for capable practitioners who may not have immediate access to postgraduate education is crucial. Universities must provide pathways and support systems to help all qualified individuals

advance

- **Resource allocation:** the increased demands of postgraduate study require adequate resources and support from educational institutions to ensure that students can succeed without undue stress or financial burden.

Embracing the future

Despite the challenges, the changes to the Standards of Education for SCPHN programmes (NMC, 2024a; 2024b) are a positive step forward. It reflects a commitment to excellence and the recognition that SCPHN practitioners play a leadership critical role in public health. By equipping students with the highest level of education and training, we can ensure that they are well-prepared to meet the complex child and young people's health and wellbeing challenges of today and tomorrow.

The NFSHE remains dedicated to supporting universities and practice areas through this transition, providing resources, advocacy, and a platform for sharing best practices. Together, we can navigate these changes and continue to uphold the highest standards of care for the communities we serve. **CHHE**

Nursing and Midwifery Council. Standards of Proficiency for Specialist Community Public Health Nurses programmes. 2004. Online. Available at: <https://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/standards-for-post-registration/pre-2022-post-registration-standards/standards-of-proficiency-for-specialist-community-public-health-nurses/> (accessed 24 May 2024)

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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