Plagiarism among nursing students a growing concern

EXCLUSIVE by Stephanie Jones-Berry @NurseNewsSteph

Thousands of nursing students in the UK have been involved in cases of academic misconduct such as plagiarism, forging signatures and cheating in exams, a Nursing Standard investigation has revealed.

Data returned to Nursing Standard from 52 universities for the four academic years 2012-13 to 2015-16 showed they recorded 2,752 cases of academic misconduct among nursing students.

Some 79% of cases involved plagiarism, but universities also reported disciplinary matters such as forging mentors’ signatures, breaching patient confidentiality, using essay-writing services, cheating in exams and falsifying data.

At the University of Brighton from 2014-16, there were four instances of nursing students forging signatures on practice documents – an act classed as major misconduct by the university. Consequences for students included failing the module and redoing placements, capped marks of 40% and, in one case, writing a 1,000-word essay on the importance of honesty and integrity in nurses.

However, a University of Brighton spokesperson said cases involving the falsification of signatures were rare and were dealt with ‘robustly’.

He said: ‘In all of these cases there were significant mitigating circumstances such as mentors forgetting to sign all of the necessary pages.

‘Throughout their course, students are advised of the importance of honesty and integrity. They are required to sign each professional practice document to confirm they are a person of good health and character.’

Blind spot

RCN head of education Anne Corrin said students often do not see the link between an academic offence and a professional one.
IN QUOTES

“We’re now calling time on junk food and fizzy drinks”
Simon Stephens
NHS England chief executive
See page 10

‘Nurses should not be forced to pay parking fines when they work unsocial hours’
Tina Donnelly
RCN Wales director
See below right

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‘If someone is forging signatures, that is unacceptable, and in whatever context we would not want nurses doing it,’ she said.

However, Ms Corrin added that there were often mitigating circumstances or personal reasons for misconduct, and highlighted one student who was taken off a nursing programme for plagiarism.

‘This person was under immense financial pressure and working a lot of hours on top of training, and was just desperate to pass.

‘It was foolish and I am not condoning it, but often there is a story there. People often do these things because they feel desperate.’

Rise in cases
The University of Chester has seen 235 disciplinary cases since 2014, when plagiarism detection software was installed for all text-based assessments. This compares with 25 cases in the two preceding years.

A spokesperson said: ‘During the first year of operation, the number of allegations of academic malpractice increased significantly.

‘This trend was fully expected and matches that seen in other institutions where the use of plagiarism detection software has been instigated.’

A Nursing and Midwifery Council spokesperson said that it was a university’s responsibility to ensure systems were in place to identify and tackle concerns about nursing students’ conduct before they reached registration.

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WORKFORCE

Cuts to training budgets undermine efforts to improve efficiency, argue experts

Moves to improve NHS productivity by bolstering existing nurses’ skills are being undermined by significant cuts to training budgets, workforce experts have warned a House of Lords select committee.

Nursing workforce expert James Buchan told the government that the focus needs to be on building the current workforce.

During an evidence session to the long-term sustainability of the NHS committee last week, Professor Buchan from Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, said one of the best ways to improve efficiency is to strengthen workers’ skills.

But he said continuing professional development (CPD) budgets are being cut by up to 45%. ‘We need to build the current workforce to enable it to work more effectively. The Council of Deans of Health, which represents the UK’s university faculties for nursing, reported that CPD budgets have been cut by 13-45%, and I cannot see how you can improve the skills of the current workforce against that funding cut.’

RCNi launched its #1hour2empower campaign this year urging employers to ensure their nurses can complete an hour of CPD per month.

Director of policy at the independent health think tank the Nuffield Trust Candace Imison argued that existing budgets should be protected.

‘It costs about £1 million to train seven doctors, or 23 nurses or 45 healthcare assistants,’ she told the committee. ‘People do not think enough about the opportunity cost of training doctors. There is good evidence that more nursing staff improves outcomes, but we do not have that evidence for doctors.’