Empowerment is like many other concepts – difficult to define yet assumed to be a good thing. Its Latin origin means ‘being able’. There is an argument that people can only empower others if they are themselves empowered.

From this perspective, an empowered nursing workforce is essential if the people in their care are to be empowered.

A research study between 2007 and 2009 explored the empowerment of nursing students in clinical practice and identified knowledge and confidence as the essential ingredients. An important part of the investigation was to understand how nursing students’ knowledge and confidence can be fostered.

The study showed that nursing students want to learn while being valued as learners and as people. It also illustrated the crucial role of mentors in recognising students’ needs and creating opportunities for them.

**Good and bad**

There were many exemplary cases where mentors did this, but unfortunately there were cases where students were removed from learning experiences and used as an extra pair of hands despite their supernumerary position.

A lack of encouragement from mentors resulted in students feeling disempowered. The study found that unfamiliar clinical environments caused anxiety for students, who only felt empowered if they were integrated and valued as a team member. There were many examples of mentors going to great lengths to ensure students’ integration into the team, but some students reported being ignored – even by mentors – during placements.

Being treated with respect involved being referred to by name rather than as ‘the student’. Some students had been shouted at by mentors in front of staff and patients, prompting some to consider discontinuing their education.

Our study also showed that empowerment depends on context and circumstances. The box below shows the three main parties responsible for ensuring students’ empowerment – mentors, placement and education providers, and students themselves – and some of their respective responsibilities. If all parties accept their responsibilities, more students could be enabled to empower their patients.

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**Roles and responsibilities**

**Nursing students**

- Show active interest in learning and use the available support systems.
- Always wear a name badge, be punctual and be aware of clinical pressures on mentors.

**Mentors**

- Provide appropriate learning opportunities.
- Respect students’ supernumerary status.
- Provide placement induction.

**Education and placement providers**

- Ensure good staffing levels in placement areas.
- Offer training programmes to qualified staff.
- Include empowerment in mentorship and undergraduate programmes.
- Prepare nursing students for placements.

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Guide to transformational leadership in nursing
http://tinyurl.com/leadership-students

Building student confidence
http://tinyurl.com/student-confidence

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Students learn best when they have mentors who recognise their particular needs.