Wheel of learning support

Michelle Roxburgh and Pat Bradley explain a successful model for co-ordinating students’ practice placements

There are many reasons why nursing students drop out of pre-registration courses, but a known contributory factor is the quality of support and learning experiences on practice placements.

Placements are generally organised so that students gain experience in a variety of settings over the duration of their training. The placement mix is usually left to the individual university to organise.

This arrangement poses several challenges, including:

- Differences in the number and length of placements across the various fields of practice and between educational institutions.
- Difficulties balancing supply and demand for particular placements.
- Differences in the quality of the placement experience as students move between practice settings.

The University of Stirling’s school of nursing, midwifery and health is testing a new ‘hub and spoke’ placement model in an attempt to address these problems.

The school is based across one main and two smaller, more remote campuses. Students experience health care in urban, remote and rural settings, which has been ideal for testing the new model.

Traditionally, students at the university have two five-week or six-week placements plus one 11-week placement during their first year of study. They are placed in practice according to the availability of placements in the traditional specialisms.

Practice-based mentors are asked to provide students with surgical, medical or management experience. Assessment of students’ competence depends less on their stage of development and more on the learning facilities offered in the placement.

In the new model, the hub placement is the main base for practice learning and where students become proficient in the Nursing and Midwifery Council’s core competencies and essential skills.

The hub location allows continual access to a named and consistent mentor or mentoring team. Students return to the same hub placement area as their clinical learning progresses, moving to a higher learning and development level with more intense assessments and reduced supervision at each stage.

Spoke placements are secondary learning opportunities, derived from and related to hub placements through the provision of additional learning experiences. These short-term placements are designed to give an overview rather than a wider learning experience.

Greater continuity

Students in the pilot study reported that the ‘hub and spoke’ placement model provided:

- A sense of belonging to the hub clinical team and clinical area.
- Continuity in mentorship and practice assessments.
- Scope for innovation in practice learning, mainly in the spoke placement.
- Better support as students become more familiar with their hub placement areas.

In the traditional model, students arrive afresh in at least three new placement areas every year, with all the attendant integration issues.

The findings in this pilot are possible because the ‘hub and spoke’ model allows students to develop a longer-lasting relationship with their mentors and the clinical team.

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