

What Works? Student Retention & Success



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Enhancing Induction to promote Belonging and Professional Identity of Mental Health Nursing Students

Rationale for the case study

It has been recognised for decades that attrition rates in nursing give cause for concern (Orton 2011). A 2006 news report suggested that attrition rates in the United Kingdom were, on average, 25% with an incumbent cost to the taxpayer of £57 million annually (Nursing Standard 2006). This does not include the additional burden of beginning the training process again or the additional cost in finding replacements for staff shortages.

The attrition rate in year 1 mental health nursing at Ulster in 2011 was 8.9%. Whilst this was around a third of the national attrition rate it raised some concerns in light of the public investment and was high in comparison to other courses within the Faculty of Life & Health Sciences. It was also noted that NSS scores on student satisfaction consistently achieved greater than 90% each year. Thus we were left with the paradoxical situation in which a high proportion of students in year 1 left the programme but those that stayed reported high levels of satisfaction with the course. It was appropriate therefore to examine the experiences students had in the first year of the programme.

This case study will demonstrate how the introduction of a bespoke induction package throughout first year improved student retention figures and developed a sense of belonging and professional identity in a group of mental health nursing students.

Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

Ulster University offers two programmes leading to initial registration as a nurse- adult nursing and mental health nursing. Mental Health Nursing is one of four fields of practice approved by the Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) (NMC 2015). At Ulster it is one of a number of programmes that lead to either a recordable or registrable qualification with the NMC. We have a core intake of around 250 students into our pre-registration programmes annually, of which 20% are mental health nursing students.

Mental Health Nursing students are commissioned by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Northern Ireland (DHSSPSNI). Each student receives a non- means tested bursary and their fees are paid directly by the DHSSPSNI. This equates to an investment on behalf of the public of approximately £30,000 per student over the three years of the programme. Hence there is a need to ensure that programmes produce safe and effective mental health nurses as well as providing value for money for the public purse.

What did we do?

Following the establishment of a steering group within the School of Nursing which included Associate Head of School and other senior office holders in the School, we set out to engage with the student body through the class representatives in each year. Having identified appropriate students and negotiated their involvement in the project we considered which of the three core themes we would focus our efforts.

The structure of the mental health nursing course is such that staff in the mental health team have limited contact with mental health nursing students during year 1. It was felt that this restriction would make both active learning and co- curricular activities difficult to design. Accordingly the Induction period for new students was chosen as the focus for our activities.

Evidence from the What Works Phase 1 research shows clearly that early engagement with students is fundamental to increased student belonging and student success (Thomas 2012). Further, the report also highlights that initiatives during the induction period should seek to build social relationships with current and new students and members of staff, and engage students with information about their course of study (Thomas 2012)

Following previous years student evaluation of induction, the design of the induction period was changed fundamentally whilst retaining the overall focus of the induction period. We sought to develop a sense of identity as a mental health professional and a sense of belonging to a mental health nursing team at Ulster University.

In order to achieve this, and in consultation with the student body through the student representatives on the project, we lengthened the induction period from a single week to the full academic semester. The primary focus of the induction week was to provide information to students about all aspects of their course (Thomas 2012). We changed this ethos to have the primary focus on the development of self- awareness and to promote academic community and relationship building. Information technologies were used to provide the designated information that students had to receive. This freed time for staff/ student, lower level student/higher level student and peer interaction (Thomas 2012). Specific sessions around the students' hopes and aspirations for the course and meetings with more experienced students and local mental health organisations were included in the revised timetable. Mental health nursing students were also taken as a single cohort in contrast to previous years when they were incorporated into the larger adult field nursing students. Social events aimed at bringing students across all three years were encouraged in the induction week.

Information around library searching and information or placements in the course were moved from the induction week to further into semester 1 at a time more appropriate to what the students were doing in relation to their course- again freeing more time for students to interact with each other and staff.

We also started a Twitter account to engage with students in an environment that was familiar to them to try to encourage engagement in the field of mental health nursing.

Changes to induction week

In previous years the timetable for induction week was focused upon the delivery of material in relation to professional requirements, health and safety and practice learning experiences. Whilst useful, this essentially left the students as passive recipients of material. Furthermore, students in

the mental health course were 'mixed' with their adult counterpart. As noted above we changed the ethos of the induction from that of information giving to that of collaboration and self- exploration.

Mental health nursing students were taken as a single cohort during the induction period. Sessions were introduced that explored the students' hopes and aspirations for the course and for their career as a mental health professional. Small group 'active learning' activities including poster design and presentation and 'show and tell' were introduced to allow students to work together to identify common shared hopes and fears. These were then discussed in the larger group.

Other ice-breaking activities including the development of a coat of arms were used to break down the initial barriers inherent in coming to University and to encourage a supportive and encouraging demeanor within the cohort. These groups were facilitated by staff from the mental health nursing team, which allowed students to put faces to names.

Additionally small group discussions with year 2 and 3 mental health nursing students were facilitated.

The material previously delivered during induction was redesigned for BlackBoard Learn (BBL) and made available through BBL.

Who was involved?

We adopted a sustainable student led approach to the development of the induction programme (See fig 1). The ideas for the sessions came from the student partnerships with the discipline lead acting as facilitator for these. Individual staff members of the mental health nursing team and students met with and led the induction sessions. The discipline lead, through the steering group, addressed any institutional issues arising from the project.

What was challenging and how did we overcome these issues?

The course structure of the mental health programme means that students have only ten hours as a separate cohort during year 1. In other classes they are integrated with the larger adult nursing programme. These were partly overcome by the mental health specific sessions throughout the semester. The additional support from peers was also apparent for students as a result of the extra time they had together during the induction week.

Internal/external enablers

The success of the project was dependent on the buy in from staff and students. Mental health nursing staff were extremely supportive and facilitative of any interventions proposed by the steering group. Likewise, our students engaged fully in the dialogue of planning and delivering the interventions.

The model of sustainable student partner involvement also contributed greatly to the success of the programme as well as the academic achievement of the individual students involved.

Evidence of impact

Data from the Belonging survey showed that perceived levels of belonging and self-confidence remained constant pre and post interventions. The level of engagement with the programme and staff increased markedly from a mean of 4.09 to 4.24 out of a possible maximum of 5.

In addition to the Belongingness survey an eight- item Likert scale was used for the evaluation of the induction period and was administered at the end of semester 1. Students were asked to rate their

agreement with each item on a four point scale- Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. The evaluation took place at the beginning of semester 2 and was completed by 43 students.

In general the induction period received a positive evaluation. Overall scores ranged from 23 to 32. (Mean= 27.23; sd= 2.71). All students reported that meeting the year 2 and 3 students was a positive experience. Indeed all positively worded statements had an average score greater than 3 (out of a possible 4).

Spending time as a mental group was significant in helping students feel part of the cohort. Similarly, meeting with more advanced students and having a mental health focus during the induction week significantly improved the student experience in the induction and helped develop a sense of identity for this group of mental health nursing students.

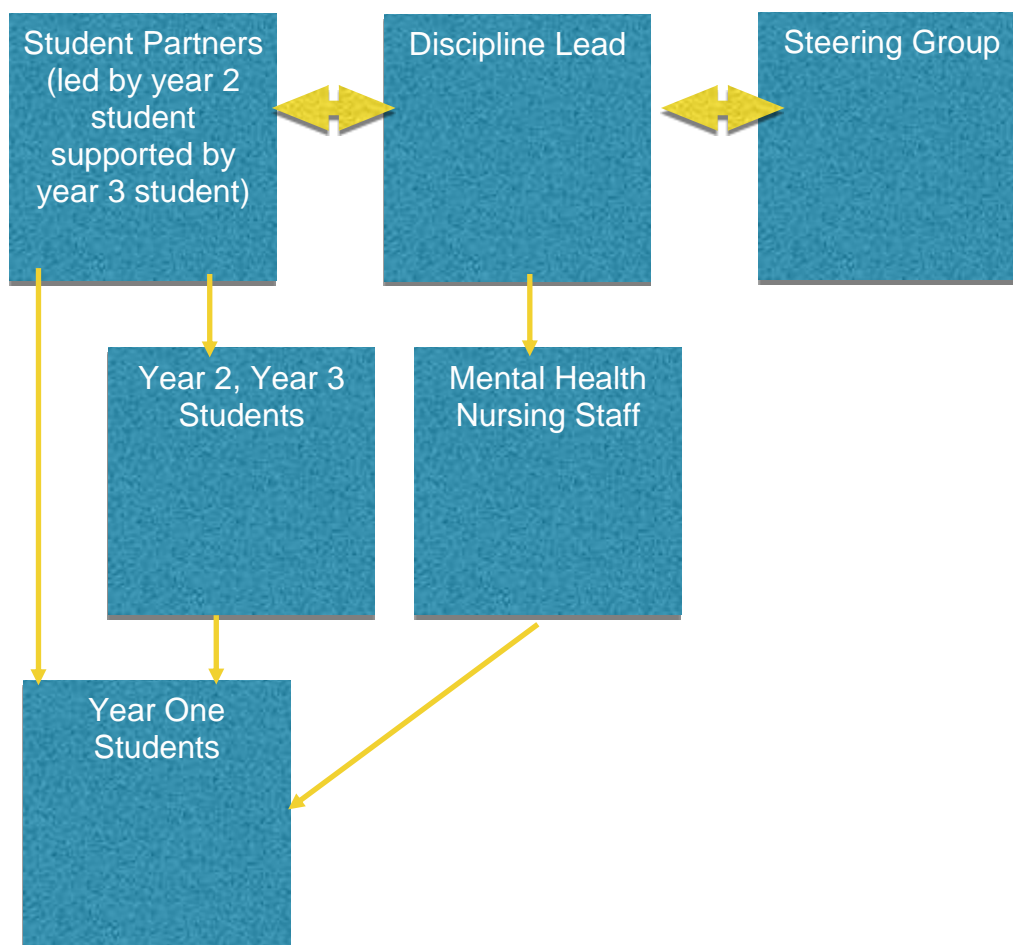


Figure 1: Relationships between staff & students in planning induction

Qualitative data was also collected by focus group at the end of semester 1. Findings from this showed that students were content with the induction, particularly because it provided them with the opportunity to meet their peers and form sound relationships. The social activities used as part of the induction allowed the students to engage with the course and establish a sense of belonging to the course.

just meeting new people. Being introduced to the staff. Seeing the university.

I enjoyed the induction week and it brought the Mental Health class altogether because we were joined along with the adult students so having the separateness meant that we were able to meet each other and we knew who was in our class. It gave you a sense of belonging.

It does give you a sense of belonging. It definitely did

(First year students)

Students reported that they felt that the ice-breaker activities were very effective in getting to know a range of peers on the course:

They were really good.

They worked really well because that's how you got talking to people.

I'm a really shy person as well so it kind of made me more at ease.

In our group of 10 we have all stayed together. You can change around or whatever but we have all stayed together and we are all kind of really friendly

You could come in your first day and just meet one person and just stick with them but they made us get up and move and go and talk to people.

(First year students)

The Mental Health Nursing students point out that as a group, they formed positive relationships and there is a sense of camaraderie as a result. They contrasted this with their observations of their peers in the adult nursing programme who they felt did not 'gel' well as a group:

There have been a lot of complaints from the adult nursing students because I don't think they are not kind of gelling together. Like we had our icebreakers and we had tutorials whereas they are kind of reserved in their own individual group. Whereas we get the time to get all together.

(First year student)

The Mental Health Nursing students seem to appreciate the fact that they were separated from the Adult Nursing students on one of the induction days, perhaps, because they identified as a group with all participants stating that they found it both useful and enjoyable

The students also appreciated personally meeting some of their lecturers during the induction.

There was a day when we were kind of in a smaller group when we met our course co-ordinator then so we got to know her. I think there were lecturers as well who came out and spoke to us.

Yes. So you know who to contact now as well if there was a problem then.

(First year students)

The students are content with their peer support and appreciate the emotional support they gain from their peers. They commented on what they valued most about their working relationship with fellow students?

Support and just being able to bounce off each other and chatting about worries and stuff.

Advice if you're not sure about something. And reminding each other about things that need to be done or checking like what way did you do that or whatever.

(First year students)

The students also mention that they were given another opportunity to talk to the older year groups from Mental Health Nursing in the preliminary weeks of the course, which proved to be beneficial in allowing the first year students to discuss any issues regarding the course and placement:

They were really well informed. They knew what they were talking about and they were very reassuring. They always said there is loads of help available you know.

They were so honest as well. They weren't filling your head with stuff.

.... they kind of reassured us and said keep your head down and do your work you will get through it. They were reassuring and then they were also able to give advice and they asked us did we have any questions so if you had any kind of issues that you felt maybe a lecturer would want to hear about then you could ask and say is it really hard to do the placements or do they place you close to home. They were able to answer all those things.

And it was a small group as well which was good.

(First year students)

How much did it contribute to improving student success?

- Compared to 11.3% in 2013/2014 our attrition rates dropped to 7.5% in 2014/ 2015- one of the lowest in the sector
- One of our student partners was the first ever nurse to be a finalist in the UK Student Volunteer of the Year competition. He was also runner up in the Northern Ireland Student Nurse of the Year in recognition of his work on this project and winner of the Ulster University Student Union Representative of the Year. Another student, involved in the meetings with year 1 students, won the UK wide Nursing Standard mental health nurse of the year.

Sustainability

Field/programme specific sessions have been adopted across the school.

Lessons learnt

When engaging with students enrolled in multi- professional courses/ modules;

- the induction period is an important part of the programme in developing relationships and professional identity:- there are numerous reports detailing the importance of the induction period and this case study adds to this body of literature. Our internal survey showed that students developed a sense of professional identity as well as personal and professional relationships with their peers.
- discipline specific induction is effective in building identity and a sense of belonging:- our mental health nursing students reported great value in spending time with their peers in the mental health programme. They report developing relationships and a sense of identity as a mental health professionals as a result of their time together during the induction period.
- on-going contact with students throughout the first semester fosters a sense of belonging:- changing the induction to a semester long 'event' increased student contact with mental health staff in contrast to previous years. Engagement with mental health staff facilitated the delivery of field specific information in relation to their up-coming placements. This allowed discussion about their fears and hopes about their placement experiences
- needs of students will vary annually, hence an on-going dialogue with students is required in the planning of future induction programmes.

References

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Acknowledgement

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For full What Works? Student Retention and Success report (2017) see <https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/>