

Covid-19 drives positive change in nurse education

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The national coronavirus lockdown forced universities throughout the UK to close their doors and shift to online learning with very little warning or preparation time. While some student nurses learned to navigate their way through virtual classrooms, others opted to do paid clinical placements to support the nursing workforce.

As universities gear up for the next academic year, *Nursing Times* has spoken to nurse educators across the country who are restructuring programmes and supporting student nurses through an unprecedented crisis.

During the pandemic, education providers have used a range of online platforms to deliver live lectures and recreate seminars. They have also created pre-recorded video lessons students can access at their convenience.

The general consensus was that the move to online teaching was set to stay in the coming months, with some universities adopting a blended approach comprising both digital and face-to-face learning. Nurse educators are also keen to bring back student nurses in reduced groups to carry out clinical skills and practice elements of the courses from the autumn.

Principal lecturer on the University of Brighton's nursing programme, Jessica Mills, told *Nursing Times* how the current situation had

moved the course into the world of remote learning for the better. Ms Mills, who is a nurse by background, said the team was "embracing the benefits" of teaching online, for example by using digital chat-room functions that allow students who may be less able to ask questions in a large lecture hall to speak up.

"We're appreciating the innovation that this change to remote delivery has enabled," she said. "Our university probably really wanted us to get on board with remote learning and – not that there is really anything positive about Covid-19 – but it has kind of forced our hand to actually all do it."

University staff who were interviewed highlighted that some nursing students had needed IT support or lacked the appropriate equipment to be able to work remotely and online. From wifi support to laptop loans, the universities made use of pockets of funding and different initiatives to ensure students could continue their courses online and off campus.

A key challenge for nurse educators across the UK was ensuring students would complete their courses on time. Since April, thousands of student nurses have been deployed into paid clinical placements – giving up their right to supernumerary status – to support the nursing workforce during the pandemic. While the offer of remunerated placements was available to third- and



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second-year students, it was agreed that first years would only do theoretical work.

However, students who did not take up the placement offer – or could not because they or those with whom they lived were shielding – have since been left concerned about how to complete their 2,300 placement hours, as required by the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Nursing programme lead at the University of Portsmouth, Dr Isobel Ryder, said universities would see the next academic year as a "recovery year" and flagged that conversations were being had on what future placement hours should look like. At

Portsmouth, simulation activities based on the campus are counted towards placement hours. Dr Ryder stressed the importance of this at a time when Covid-19 was creating additional pressure on the NHS and warned that if universities did not use simulation suites "properly", they may not get their desired number of students through on time.

"There's a big regional discussion about what placement activity is," she told *Nursing Times*. "Because, it's not just what goes on in the NHS. We don't want to put more pressure onto an already complex system, so we just need to be a bit cleverer about what placement is."

She added that online consultations could also be classed as a placement and that consideration was needed around how to embed that into a curriculum.

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Dr Ryder, who is a nurse and midwife. "I think the next few years will be interesting in terms of how we move nurse education forward."

She pointed out that by using scenario-based simulation and simulated patients, "you can frame an experience that a student would find very challenging". The university's simulation suite was a "big driver" for getting nursing students back onto campus, she added.

"We can socially distance there, we can get them to learn how to wash their hands – all that kind of contextual learning that is really important for a new student coming in," said Dr Ryder, who urged other universities to fully use these activities where possible during the crisis to ensure they can get students through.

Some universities have brought forward year-two theory work for first-year students who had not been able to complete their set amount of placement in their academic year. This would give them time to make up the lost placement hours in their second year.

For nursing students shielding from coronavirus, for example, due to being classed as vulnerable or high risk, the picture across the UK seems mixed. On the whole, universities wanted to avoid these students having

to defer their studies but they acknowledged that, for some individuals, there may be no choice but to interrupt their nursing programme.

For institutions such as the University of Portsmouth, with more than one cohort intake per year, Dr Ryder suggested those shielding could "step back half a year".



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Meanwhile, at Cardiff University a colour-coded system is being implemented at its health board partners, designed to highlight the risk of coronavirus on each ward. Susan Ward, senior lecturer and head of nursing, said that some students had been deployed into non-patient areas during the outbreak and this could be a viable option for those who are more vulnerable.

"We have been able to accommodate some of those students who cannot be in particular areas and we have maintained some non-Covid areas for those students who

may be more vulnerable," she told *Nursing Times*.

Ms Ward also confirmed that student nurses in Wales who qualified for an NHS bursary would continue to receive the financial support if their courses overran because of the pandemic.

In the wake of the pandemic, the Department of Health and Social Care confirmed to *Nursing Times* that it will "ensure student nurses get the support they need to graduate, including access to financial support".

In England, student nurse bursaries were axed in 2016. However, after years of dwindling application rates, as of September, those on nursing courses will receive a cost-of-living grant.

Nurses in Scotland will also have their bursaries extended if required, according to professor of nursing at the University of Glasgow, Ann Marie Rice. Professor Rice, who is also head of the university's Nursing and Health Care School, said it had been agreed that "students will not be disadvantaged financially".

There is evidence that universities across the UK are making efforts to ensure student nurses' wellbeing is supported throughout the pandemic. As an example, Professor Rice explained how her team had launched extra support sessions online for students to air their worries or concerns.

"We set up drop-in sessions for all the years so we could keep in touch with them when they were out on

placement," she told *Nursing Times*. "Some of them were of course very anxious – not so much anxious about getting Covid, it was about being able to get the programme finished on time."

In addition, first years had been "so disappointed" that they were not allowed to respond to the crisis by being in a clinical setting. "It was really good to see that attitude," said Professor Rice.

Nursing staff at the University of Northampton also stressed the importance of providing students with additional support during the pandemic – and not only those students on placements, but also those who opted out and were, in some cases, feeling guilty.

Dr Fiona Barchard, senior lecturer of adult nursing and curriculum and programme lead, said: "We have been doing weekly support sessions with students who opted in throughout Covid in terms of what they might see out there and additional support they need.

"But we have been really mindful of making sure that we still are supporting those who have opted out as well. Because, whether you have opted out because you are shielding or it's just not right for you and your family, some of the students felt quite guilty about that."

All university staff who were interviewed expressed praise and admiration for the response of their student nurses to the coronavirus crisis, whether at home or in the workplace. As Dr Barchard said: "There have been several occasions...when they make you feel so proud. You think, 'Actually, you really are stepping up and taking this on the chin'. And that's what they need to be [doing] as nurses. You've got to be resilient; you've got to be able to cope with never-ending change."



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