How the introduction of clinical teaching fellows can benefit nursing

The demand for registered nurses continues to grow in the UK and there is a great need for strong collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) and clinical practice placement providers. Student nurses are still an asset to health service delivery, but placement availability and capacity challenges highlight the need for colleges and universities to forge closer partnerships with their practice providers. This would help to make sure that academia and practice are seen as one equal entity for students undertaking their nursing education.

A recent bulletin from the Council of Deans of Health (2021) has stated that joint appointments between HEIs and practice providers should be encouraged, as close partnerships are essential. The role of a clinical teaching fellow (CTF) adheres to this advice; it is well established in medicine, with the number of medical CTFs rising to meet the demand, but the nursing arena is still to follow suit in many institutions.

In most institutions, the nursing profession is yet to exploit the benefits of joint CTF posts between local universities and their associated NHS trust providers, but the idea of clinical nurse educators (CNEs) is not a novel concept. There have been CNEs across most NHS trusts since as early as the 1950s, with a focus on improving recruitment, retention and skills modernisation (Whitehead, 2019). It is important to acknowledge the similarities between CTF posts and the CNE roles that are well established in healthcare, although there is a vital difference in the perspective of CTFs and CNEs: CTFs focus wholly on undergraduate nurses and are an alliance between practice and university education and, as such, share a mirrored focus on the curriculum and student outcomes.

In this article...
● Collaboration between practice partners and higher education institutions
● The impact of implementing the clinical teaching fellow role in nursing
● Evaluating the experiences of staff and student engagement with clinical teaching fellows

Key points
Higher education institutions need to forge stronger partnerships with their practice providers
Clinical teaching fellows can offer many benefits in the nursing arena
Feedback from student nurses indicates that the clinical teaching fellow role improves experience
Clinical teaching fellowships are a viable career pathway for nurse academics

Keywords Clinical teaching fellows/Nursing education/Collaboration

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Abstract The need to educate and grow an increasing number of registered nurses continues to pose a challenge to practice providers and higher education institutions, so it is important to forge stronger, collaborative partnerships between organisations. It is here that the role of the clinical teaching fellow has been introduced to nurse education to bridge the gap and improve student experiences; this article explores the origins of the role, evaluates the effectiveness within our institution at the University of York and York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals, and promotes the initiative of clinical fellowships for aspiring nurse academics.

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Clinical teaching fellows can help student nurses improve their skills in simulation units

“Sessions have been student focused, rather than outcome based, and have taken place in the trust and at the university’s simulation unit”

Clinical Practice
Innovation

must avoid mirroring, given the current climate in clinical practice.

The need to provide further supervision for student nurses is supported by the Council of Deans of Health’s (2018) claims that higher education institutions and practice partners must forge stronger partnerships, giving way to nurses taking on the role of the CTF that is commonly found in medicine.

Literature on the subject
A significant amount of literature has been published around medical CTF pathways, and many of these studies describe the roles in detail. However, the articles and job descriptions found through job searches and a survey conducted by Wilson et al (2008) show there is little uniformity in the activities undertaken in posts. Some roles have clearly distinguished the responsibilities between the two organisations; some state that, in medical schools, CTFs focus mainly on curriculum development and assessment design while, in trusts, the weight is on the organisation and delivery of teaching (Furmedge et al, 2013).

In other reviews of the subject (Chu et al, 2019), there is less standardisation in what is undertaken at each institution. Medical CTFs are generally described as taking on bedside teaching and simulation, as well as curriculum-based activities (Chu et al, 2019).

CTF roles are not well established in most nursing institutions in the UK, as they are in medicine. The University of York, along with York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, led an innovative and cohesive partnership to improve student nurse experiences by creating vacancies for two full-time clinical teaching fellows that were initially advertised in October 2020.

Many medical CTF posts are on a temporary basis of one year, with the emphasis being on developing medics’ teaching portfolios for future positions. This is not the case for the CTF for nursing post in York; permanent contracts are offered to both candidates, cementing the need to have permanent positions as viable career options in education for registrants.

Our aims with the role
Since I started in the CTF for nursing role in February 2021, the focus has been on exploring the gaps in service provision from the perspective of student nurses. It was my first academic appointment after working in critical care nursing on qualifying from the University of York in 2019. There is a significant benefit in having relatively recent experience as a student nurse, as it provides an insight into the challenges students face; these benefits are highlighted in literature, such as that by Woodfield and O’Sullivan (2014).

What we did in the first six months of the role, until August 2021, echoes what is found in the literature around medical CTFs. While at university, we have been involved in:

● Curriculum design;
● Module development;
● Academic assessor roles;
● Delivering teaching from the curriculum.

Work in the trust has focused mostly on student experiences, with regular walk-arounds, focus groups, forging links with the medical school, and the development of clinical skills workshops.

The skills workshops aimed to increase student confidence and competence in clinical skills, many of which were in deficit due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The workshops have developed from students’ feedback, often in collaboration with specialist nurses, with skills being offered, as set out in Box 1. Sessions have been student focused, rather than outcome based, and have taken place both in the trust and at the university’s simulation unit. They have been evaluated well by students.

Staff and student evaluation
The first six months of this post were heavily focused on shaping and creating a vision for the role – evaluations played a key part in this. Students and staff at the university were sent an online evaluation form to complete. It consisted of a combination of free text and closed Likert-scale questions, with responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

There was a reasonable response rate, with 52 students from all stages and fields of

Box 1. Simulated skills sessions offered

● Nasogastric tube insertion
● Catheterisation
● Aseptic technique
● Stoma care
● ECG monitoring and basic interpretation
● Tracheostomy care
● Medicines management
● Management of emergency situations
● ABCDE assessment

ABCDE = airway, breathing, circulation, disability, exposure; ECG = electrocardiogram
practice, as well as 20 staff members out of 37 staff with whom we worked most closely, completing the evaluation. This gave a response rate of 54% among staff. Of the staff members, 70% (n=114) were teaching staff and 30% (n=6) were support staff. Staff and students both responded positively about their experiences of the CTF role, with all students feeling the role was “required” at the same point in the previous year. Interestingly, staff responses to this question differed: 65% of staff agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

All staff and students strongly agreed that there had been a positive impact on student experiences and the role had contributed positively to the Department of Health Sciences. It is encouraging to see that, although many staff did not foresee the role as being a ‘requirement’, they now feel it is a favourable addition to the department.

As well as quantitative figures gained from the evaluation forms, written feedback was provided by many, highlighting key themes from both students and staff. Students praised the role openly, and there was some supportive and constructive feedback from staff (Table 1).

### Our goals for the role

We worked hard to shape the role over the first six months and there are many goals. Forging stronger interdisciplinary links is at the forefront of plans over the coming months. This could mean working both in and outside of our HEI, and the benefit of teaching across disciplines such as social care, medicine, physiotherapy and occupational therapy could be invaluable. Students’ anecdotal feedback expressed a desire for this and it was mentioned in the staff evaluation forms. Establishing interdisciplinary links is already under way, but progress could be made to better prepare our future multidisciplinary workforce.

### The future of CTFs

Although this role is in its infancy, definite benefits of having CTF posts for nursing can be seen. The CTF role has long been successful in medicine, and it could be just as successful in nursing – from both a student perspective and for aspiring nurse academics who are looking to pursue a career in nurse education. This role allows such candidates to develop their teaching portfolio in practice and in an HEI, providing insight into, and experience of, developing and delivering a nurse curriculum.

Much of the anecdotal feedback and that garnered through the evaluations echoes findings from the literature, demonstrating that practitioners who are relatively junior are often best placed to educate students and take on a more student-centred approach to education (Van Heerden et al, 2020; Woodfield and O’Sullivan, 2014).

Roles such as the CTF could be explored by HEIs to bridge the gap between practice providers and academic education to improve student nurse experiences, while forging stronger links between institutions. Given the current challenges in practice, this is becoming ever more important. NT

### “The clinical teaching fellow role has long been successful in medicine, and it is a pathway that could be just as successful in nursing”

#### Table 1. Student and staff feedback on clinical teaching fellow support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General feedback</strong></td>
<td>Student voices were being heard and concerns were being acted on</td>
<td>A unique asset to the department, particularly as alumni ambassadors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improved confidence</td>
<td>Helped to clarify links between theory and practice for students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive to have CTFs with recent links to practice</td>
<td>Some ambiguity around motives for the role</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helped bridge the gap between university and placement</td>
<td>Reports of great value from students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt more supported</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt valued by the university when seen by CTFs while on practice placements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role development avenues</strong></td>
<td>More involvement in placement</td>
<td>Scale up CTF role for wider reach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continue to offer skills workshops</td>
<td>Act on concerns around sustainability of the role’s aims, and heavy workload in future</td>
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<td></td>
<td>More involvement in lectures</td>
<td>Develop undergraduate interdisciplinary teaching</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Work with other university trust partners to develop closer relationships and replicate learning opportunities</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More integration with module teaching and mandatory training for students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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CTF = clinical teaching fellow

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References


Council of Deans of Health (2021) Supporting the Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professional Academic Workforce and Improving Clinical Academic Careers. CDH.


