Engaging student nurses in research 1: research-delivery placements

Key points

- Clinical research has been identified as part of the NHS’s core business
- Placements with research teams teach students how clinical research is carried out across the NHS
- Research placements promote the field of clinical research and support workforce recruitment and retention
- Planning for students to work with a variety of research teams can improve placements and distribute workload

Research is increasingly important for the nursing profession. This was reflected by the chief nursing officer (CNO) for England in the NHS’s (2021) strategic plan for research, which outlined an ambition to “create a people-centred research environment that empowers nurses to lead, participate in and deliver research” and for research to be “fully embedded in practice and professional decision-making, for public benefit”. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has also expressed a hope that future student nurses will be exposed to, and engaged, in research (NMC, 2018a).

This article is the first in a two-part series that explores potential approaches to raising the profile of research in undergraduate nursing programmes through practice placements. The series discusses how placements can provide an opportunity for student nurses to engage with, and experience, research practice in its various forms. This article focuses on clinical research practice placements, and the second will describe a model for a clinical academic placement to show how it can incorporate the breadth of research.

Benefits of research placements

Clinical research delivery is crucial to embedding research into nursing for the long-term benefit of patients. The CNO for England’s strategic plan is supported by the director for nursing and midwifery at the National Institute for Health and Care Research, which supports clinical research delivery throughout the UK (NHS, 2021). It also reflects ambitions set out in both the Department of Health & Social Care et al’s (2021) implementation plan and the NHS’s (2021) strategic plan, which aims to “release nurses’ research potential”.

To achieve this, the importance and potential of research in all its forms needs to be highlighted and promoted at the earliest stages of nurses’ careers. The most common way of integrating research into undergraduate teaching for nurses, midwives and allied health professionals is through research-informed teaching around evidence-based practice, research methods.
We observe that clinical research delivery is often neither considered, nor highlighted as a viable or exciting career option, to student nurses. Succession planning is equally important in research delivery as in any other area of nursing, and the most committed and passionate nurses should be encouraged to consider this career pathway whenever possible.

Undergraduate placements offer student nurses the opportunity to gain skills and knowledge to complement their academic learning. Undertaking a placement with a research team gives undergraduate nurses research skills and teaches them how clinical research is being carried out across the wider NHS. As research has been identified as part of the NHS’s core business (NHS, 2021; NMC, 2018a), learning about all aspects of research is vital for student nurses and midwives.

Both universities and students began recognising that placements with research teams offer valuable learning opportunities for student nurses (Naylor et al, 2014). Clinical research nurses have specific and specialised research-delivery expertise, as well as skills that translate to general nursing care; student nurses can, therefore, gain diverse experience from such placements (Box 1).

There are two models of service provision in clinical research:

- Generic teams that cover a wide breadth of clinical specialities;
- Teams embedded in a speciality.

Both models offer students a range of opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge, and to help them meet their pre-registration proficiencies (NMC, 2018a).

They also allow students to learn about widely recognised research standards; this includes the Guideline for Good Clinical Practice, which is the International Council for Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use’s (2016) international ethical, scientific and practical standard.

Nationally, there are practice placement capacity issues, due to the expansion of pre-registration nursing places (NHS, 2019). In many trusts, research teams are an underused resource for student placements (Council of Deans of Health, 2021) and can help expand practice placement capacity in organisations. They also broaden the range of placements available for undergraduate nurses, increasing the options open to higher education institutes and enabling a better matching of students to suitable placements.

Clinical research teams can also provide elective placements for students, supporting their emerging interests in various and skills (Council of Deans of Health, 2021). We observe that clinical research delivery is often neither considered, nor highlighted as a viable or exciting career option, to student nurses. Succession planning is equally important in research delivery as in any other area of nursing, and the most committed and passionate nurses should be encouraged to consider this career pathway whenever possible.

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aspects of nursing practice. The current nursing recruitment and retention issues facing many trusts mean organisations need to use all strategies available to attract high-calibre individuals. Offering valuable placements with research teams can form part of a wider workforce recruitment and retention strategy: in our experience, newly registered nurses often begin their careers in teams where they have completed successful, enjoyable and fulfilling placements.

In the past, clinical research nurses have been unable to use their mentoring and supervisory skills due to a lack of student nurses in their teams, and many welcome the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge to undergraduate nurses (Lafleur and White, 2010). Having learners in a team:
- Motivates staff;
- Enhances job satisfaction;
- Challenges practice;
- Encourages staff to question and justify their ways of working, thereby enhancing quality and safety (Lafleur and White, 2010).

There are also benefits of students who do not go on to choose a career in clinical research undertaking placements with these teams. It increases their knowledge in this essential element of healthcare, and supports and promotes the field of clinical research.

Box 2 gives two case studies of students who have undertaken placements with research teams and found them beneficial.

### Challenges of research placements

There are some challenges around student nurses undertaking placements with clinical research teams; considering these can maximise the success of placements.

As these placements do not offer conventional, ward-based experiences, they need to be offered to students at a point when they can make the most of the opportunities provided. This is, ideally, when students can build on existing clinical knowledge and skills; if they do these placements too early, they may not be able to make the most of the opportunities available. However, if done too late, the placements may not enable students to meet any remaining competencies that are required to complete their undergraduate programme.

Research placements work best when the research team thinks creatively about how competencies can be met and learning opportunities maximised. Planning for students to work across different teams can result in a better placement and distribute the workload. This requires collaboration and cross-team working, but the wider benefit of this is that it can improve routine working relationships between teams.

To improve placements, research teams need to develop additional resources to support students during quieter times or while research staff are doing administrative tasks that have minimal learning opportunities. This ensures learning is maximised and students are continually educationally challenged while on placement. Additional resources could include:
- Online learning;
- Exercises to practise research skills, such as screening for study eligibility;
- Project work that benefits the clinical area.

Using case-study exercises to promote learning is widely advocated (Heale and Twycross, 2018; Popil, 2011) and can be used to good effect in research placements.

As with most practice placements, engaged, enthusiastic and motivated students are the ideal candidates and gain the most benefit from their experience. Managing student expectations is crucial, and some students may be initially disappointed not to be allocated a ward-based placement. However, any issues can usually be overcome by:
- Identifying the learning opportunities;
- Emphasising the freedom students will have to tailor their experiences to their interests;
- Showing the enthusiasm that staff have for their work.

This is in line with the ethos of the NMC’s (2018b) standards, which advocate that practice learning not only supports the diverse needs of individual students but also empowers students to be proactive and take responsibility.

### Box 3. Practical tips for clinical research teams arranging research placements

- Consider for how long the team can support a single student, bearing in mind that good-quality, shorter placements can be more sustainable.
- Consider the timing of research placements: students may benefit from them most when they can build on existing skills but are under less pressure to achieve specific clinical proficiencies.
- Prepare well and develop meaningful activities that students can do while the team is carrying out administrative activities.
- Give students time with a range of research teams; consider research as a specialty and give students a chance to see how it is undertaken across various clinical areas.
- Arrange insight visits into clinical research-support functions (such as regulatory approvals) to show students the multidisciplinary nature of clinical research.
- Allow students to develop their clinical knowledge by arranging placements in clinical specialties where research is being undertaken.

Box 3 lists practical ways to overcome barriers to arranging research placements.

### Conclusion

Clinical research practice placements for undergraduates are an underused resource with benefits for individuals, organisations and the profession. Successful placements can enthuse students about the possibilities a research-active nursing career provides and empower them to seek out opportunities in this field post registration.

Clinical research is a core element of healthcare, and student nurses should have the chance to be exposed to it if they are to understand the importance and potential of research, both for patients and as a career option for nurses. To truly be the core business of the NHS, clinical research delivery must be offered to student nurses. NT

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