In its proficiency standards for registered nurses, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) stated that "the confidence and ability to think critically, apply knowledge and skills, and provide expert, evidence-based, direct nursing care [...] lies at the centre of all registered nursing practice" (NMC, 2018a). Higher education institutions must design and deliver a programme of education and learning opportunities that will allow student nurses to develop and meet the standards of proficiency for registered nurses (NMC, 2018b; NMC, 2018c); this includes preparing students to understand and engage with research throughout their career after registration.

The first article in this two-part series explored how placements with clinical research teams can offer excellent learning opportunities for students. This second article describes a model for a clinical academic placement that has been designed to complement university teaching and provides an opportunity for students to actively engage with locally developed, clinically focused research projects.

There is considerable variation between UK higher education institutions in the percentage of students who undertake research projects – ranging from 0% to 100% – and undergraduates are more likely to carry out a literature review than primary research (Council of Deans of Health, 2019). This is because of time constraints and barriers to getting appropriate research approvals (Reutter et al, 2010). However, there is evidence that undergraduate students would prefer to gain direct experience of research (Council of Deans of Health, 2019). The chief nursing officer for England’s strategic plan for research emphasises the role that all nurses play in supporting, leading and delivering research (NHS, 2021); with research identified as part of NHS core

In this article...

● Why it is important for student nurses to gain experience of research
● How clinical academic placements can teach students about research conduct
● How to set up and run placements that benefit staff and students

Key points

There is variation across higher education institutions in the percentage of students who undertake research projects

Nurses can be asked to lead practice reviews, despite many having little experience or confidence

Clinical placements can allow students to gain practical skills and experience of research conduct

Leading and supporting these placements also requires staffing resource and commitment

These placements can encourage students to follow a clinical academic career pathway

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Abstract Registered nurses need to be prepared to understand and engage with research. This article – the second in a two-part series – discusses the value of clinical academic placements and focuses on one run by Birmingham Women’s and Children’s NHS Foundation Trust. Such placements can offer student nurses the opportunity to develop the insight and practical skills needed for quality improvement, service evaluation and audit. They also encourage students to consider further development as an evidence-based practitioner or clinical academic, as well as evaluating their own research questions relevant to their clinical practice.

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Box 1. Case studies of research placements at the trust

Samantha, research nurse

“I joined the paediatric intensive care unit (PICU) research team on a research placement in my third year. This was the first time a student had been offered a placement specifically to [undertake] PICU research. During this placement, I collaborated with the research team to do an audit, reviewing the frequency and nature of interruptions during the preparation and administration of medications. I helped create and pilot a data-collection tool, collected and analysed the data, and disseminated the results to nurse managers. We observed over 350 medication episodes in the audit period, of which over 80% of episodes experienced an interruption. Seeing the data first hand – and the direct implications for nursing practice – was exciting and helped me understand the importance of evidence-based practice. This ignited my passion to follow a career path that develops my clinical and research skills simultaneously.

I took my first registered nurse post on [the] PICU, volunteered to continue to audit medication practice, and presented the results locally and nationally. After a year, I applied for [and got] my first research nurse job in [the] PICU, supporting research delivery, gaining skills and expertise, and supporting student placements. I was keen to be involved in the research placements, to try and inspire other students in the same way that my placement inspired me.

Since then, I’ve been supported to continue my development as a clinical academic, firstly through the National Institute for Health [and Care] Research’s internship programme and then [through] Birmingham Health Partners’ research fellowship and [a] master’s [degree] in research. My goals now are to apply for and complete a PhD, continue to develop my skills as a clinical academic, accelerate improvements in [the] PICU and be at the forefront of evidence-based care.”

Annabel, staff nurse

“At the end of my second year, I chose to undertake a four-week research elective placement. The scheme had only been running for one year, so there was not a huge amount of information about what it would involve, but I thought it would be interesting to gain new skills and apply research theory I’d learnt in lectures.

I was assigned to a project on early mobilisation in [the] PICU. This involved observing medical ward rounds to assess patient sedation and mobilisation planning. I was nervous about what I would be doing on a day-to-day basis and how I would manage my time. I did preliminary literature searches on the topic to better understand it and inform the development and pilot of a data-collection tool, before independently completing 17 days of data collection. I then entered the data, analysed it, drew conclusions, identified my recommendations for further study and presented the work to the team [about] developing an early mobilisation programme on [the] PICU. This improved my confidence and presentation skills greatly, and I also felt I had played a part in the development of an initiative to improve patient care.

The impact of this placement on my career has been significant. I changed where I wanted to start my first post as a newly qualified nurse – from [adult] nursing to [working on a] PICU – which I had never considered before. I wrote up my elective project for my dissertation and was fortunate to be able to present this at national and international conferences on behalf of the team. I not only gained practical knowledge and skills, but also new ways of working with multidisciplinary health professionals. I also gained an appreciation of the value of nurse- and allied health professional-led research and an appreciation of why we need [staff employed in] clinical academic posts. I’ve [also] recently been appointed to a research secondment, working with the clinical research-delivery nurses on [the] PICU.”

Running a clinical academic placement

At Birmingham Women’s and Children’s NHS Foundation Trust, we created a four-week elective placement of 150 hours that offers undergraduate nurses the opportunity to gain the following practical skills and experience associated with research conduct:

- Development of data-collection tools;
- Data collection;
- Data entry and analysis;
- IT skills;
- Observing and reviewing clinical practice;
- Working with research nurses and learning about their role and responsibilities;
- Learning about the role of clinically based supervisors;
- Learning the difference between audit, service evaluation, quality improvement and research;
- Insight into NHS governance and approval processes.

During their placement, students work with a clinical mentor to:

- Identify a quality-improvement or evaluation project of value to the clinical area;
- Carry it out;
- Present the results.

This placement has now been running for five years over six cohorts; during this time, we have run placements for a total of 32 students from three higher education institutions. Evaluation has been very positive, and undertaking the placement has had a sustained positive impact on participants’ views of, and interest in, research. Box 1 details the experiences of two nurses who undertook the placement while at university.

business, gaining practical experience is vital for current and future undergraduate nurses and midwives.

Registered nurses can be asked to lead or contribute to a review of practice and identify where improvements need to be made. However, Twycross and Shorten (2014) found that many nurses received little exposure to, or experience of, under-

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One year after their placement, 88% of students said they would consider undertaking a service evaluation and 65% said they would consider postgraduate study (Menzies et al, 2021). This supports the Association of UK University Hospitals' (2016) goals to develop clinical academic pathways for newly qualified nurses by talent spotting at undergraduate level.

A key element of such placements is that they must be mutually beneficial; they need to enable the organisation to gather information and address high-priority work, and give the student enough time to:

- Capture meaningful information about the topic of interest;
- Contribute to insights about possible solutions;
- Identify and/or contribute to further research.

To achieve this, our placement leads work closely with the clinical teams to select projects that reflect departmental or organisational priorities. This helps promote staff engagement.

Our placements also give students the opportunity to work in clinical areas that are not usually available to them; for example, adult nursing students can undertake a placement on a paediatric ward. The placements also allow them to practise skills of critique, which are important for patient safety (Care Quality Commission, 2018), and to gain in-depth insight into nursing practice, which is often transferable to other clinical settings.

Overcoming challenges

Involving undergraduate students in research is challenging for higher education institutions, due to governance requirements and the limited time available (Reitmaier Koehler et al, 2015). To overcome this, we focus on involving students in service evaluation, quality improvement or audit projects; this gives the students the opportunity to employ systematic and rigorous methods to address clearly defined objectives of a project that has been scaled for the available time. We feel this offers them a relevant learning opportunity and can provide them with a sense of achievement, although we recognise this is not reflective of the full research process.

Another challenge is the timing of the placement for each student nurse. We have found that it works best when a student has acquired sufficient knowledge and skills to have insight into care provision, but no longer needs to meet specific clinical competencies. Offering this as an elective placement at the end of students’ second year has worked well (Menzies et al, 2021), although this limits placement capacity.

Leading and supporting these placements also requires staffing resources and commitment. Protected time is essential for a placement lead and supervisors, and the availability of appropriate supervisors may be challenging for some departments.

Lastly, the placement depends on the engagement and enthusiasm of students who are receptive to a different way of working. It encourages them to liaise with clinical teams, identify how to capture data on the issue of interest, and plan their working day accordingly. In our experience, some students struggle with the lack of structure and autonomous working. Clear communication before the placement and on induction, accompanied by support from the supervisor, can help students prepare for this and avoid concerns about a lack of direction. Furthermore, as the NMC (2018a) has stated that nurses “must be able to work autonomously”, if coordinated and led well, this type of placement can provide a key learning opportunity.

Advice for setting up such placements is outlined in Box 2.

Conclusion

Research is an essential and rewarding part of effective nursing care. It is relevant to all nurses and, as such, requires the development of placements that cultivate critical thinking and offer opportunities for active engagement in research. This article describes the development of a placement and its positive impact on stimulating student nurses’ interest in research. Projects like this are fundamental for research to truly be embraced as core NHS business and to achieve the associated benefits for patient care.

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