

In this article...

- Why placement capacity in general practice has often been constrained
- How a partnership developed and ran a GP student placement online and in person
- The impact of the placement on students and suggestions for similar projects

Developing a general practice digital placement for student nurses

Key points

Capacity for student nursing placements in general practice has often been constrained

On a new placement, four days each week were delivered online and one in a GP surgery

The digital days included consultation role plays, peer supervision and online learning

Students were supported by a practice supervisor and received feedback from a practice assessor

A survey showed most students wanted more days in the GP surgery but enjoyed the course structure

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Abstract A joint initiative created a student nursing placement in primary care. Digital learning days enabled students to participate in virtual consultation sessions and develop skills in health promotion and ill-health prevention. Students also spent one day each week in a GP surgery to consolidate learning. This mix of learning experiences was evaluated highly by students and, after undertaking the placement, many viewed GP nursing as a future career.

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The value of nursing students undertaking a primary care placement is widely recognised (Lewis et al, 2019). However, placement capacity in general practice has often been constrained due to:

- Limited space in GP surgeries;
- Small nursing teams;
- General practice nurses' (GPNs') concerns about having the capacity to provide supervision;
- The non-medical placement tariff, which is viewed by GPNs as low in comparison with the medical placement tariff (Fear, 2016).

This was compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, which changed the way GPNs worked. Face-to-face patient care was reduced following a rapid move to increased digital healthcare and remote working (Queen's Nursing Institute, 2020). This led to a justifiable reduction in student placement capacity.

To increase placement capacity and enable GPNs to feel supported as educators, we developed a primary care digital placement through the Inspire project, a

joint initiative between Cambridge and Peterborough Training Hub (CPTH) and Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), which received funding from Health Education England. During the five-week placement, each week students undertook four digital learning days and worked for one day in a GP surgery. This aimed to support digital learning and provide opportunities to practise clinical skills.

Setting up the placement

We felt it was important to ensure the project's objectives (Box 1) reflected key drivers in primary care. We therefore based them on the *NHS Long Term Plan* (NHS England, 2019) – which focuses on increasing the workforce via primary care networks, delivering care to meet communities' needs and increasing digital technology – and NHS England's (2017) *General Practice – Developing Confidence, Capability and Capacity*, which aims to increase the number of pre-registration clinical placements and primary care roles, as well as promote the role of the GPN as a first-destination career.

Clinical Practice Innovation

Box 1. The placement's objectives for students

- Understand the general practice nurse role and the specific skills it requires
- Learn the importance of health promotion and ill-health prevention
- Demonstrate awareness of holistic assessment and treatment and demonstrate a person-centred approach to patient care
- Develop strategies to promote health and wellbeing at work
- Improve digital technology skills

Working collaboratively, the Inspire project lead, CPTH education lead and ARU education champion created and delivered the project. We chose second-year nursing students to undertake the placement, because they had recently completed a relevant module about long-term conditions and would also be contemplating career destinations.

To ensure geographical spread, we identified 18 GP surgeries that were willing to offer a placement for one day per week and we undertook an educational audit as part of the quality-assurance process. This involved meeting each practice's placement facilitator to explore learning opportunities available, obtain contact details and confirm relevant policies and processes. GPNs from participating practices were invited to preparation sessions for practice supervisors and assessors; these were delivered by the Inspire project, CPTH and ARU. At these sessions, we:

- Explained the reason for creating these placements;
- Shared the Inspire project's previous work in promoting the value of GPNs;
- Provided information about students' practice-assessment documentation.

Delivering the placement

The five-week placement ran from 7 December 2020 to 23 January 2021; 17 adult nursing students and one children's nursing student participated. The content of the digital element consisted of topics that reflect the roles and skills of GPNs (Box 2); students participated in virtual group consultations, role plays and long-term condition management sessions. Learning activities included talks given by:

- A respiratory nurse specialist;
- A practice manager/lead practice nurse.

Three practice supervisors and two practice assessors supported the digital days. Two nurses joined from CPTH, and three nurses were recruited through an

Box 2. Topics covered on the digital placement

- Introduction to the general practice nurse role
- Transformational conversations:
 - Health coaching
 - Motivational interviewing
 - Patient activation
- Tissue viability
- Multiprofessional team working
- Chronic illness
- Pulmonary rehabilitation
- Mental health in general practice
- Women's health:
 - Contraceptive health
 - Menopause
 - Domestic violence
- Diabetes
- Common medications

event for GPNs interested in supporting students. This enabled two practice supervisors to be present with the students every afternoon; each was responsible for nine students. An administrator managed IT queries and monitored attendance.

We developed a placement guide and short video to introduce students to the

digital element of the placement. This included profiles of the practice supervisors and assessors, learning activities and expectations required of students.

The students received a timetable (Table 1) and a placement manual that gave them access to learning activities, reflective questions and links to websites hosted on a Microsoft Teams channel. Initial difficulties with internet connectivity and technology were quickly resolved with administrative support. The education champion met with practice supervisors and assessors to answer questions about assessment documentation and student issues. This reflected a partnership approach used throughout the placement.

Assessment and evaluation

Students met their practice assessor at the formative and summative assessment points. Decisions about their progress were based on evidence of learning gathered by the digital practice supervisors in the following ways:

- Verbally;
- On students' practice-assessment documentation;
- Through verbal feedback from practice supervisors in the GP surgeries.

Table 1. Students' timetable for one of the digital days

Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Activity
7.30-7.45am	8.30-8.45am	9.30-9.45am	● Mindfulness meditation
7.45-11am	8.45am-12pm	9.45am-1pm	● Introduce daily topic ● Complete practice-learning log ● Online learning resources and observations of pre-recorded GPN consultations
11-11.30am	12-12.30pm	1-1.30pm	● Consider how to structure a consultation
12-12.55pm	1-1.55pm	2-2.55pm	● Virtual consultation with a volunteer patient (a student acts as the nurse; the 'patient', practice supervisor and peers give the student feedback)
1-2pm	2-3pm	3-4pm	● Individual reflection on consultation and the nurse's role in diagnosis and prevention
2-3pm	3-4pm	4-5pm	● Peer supervision (a student chooses a topic and the group reflects and finds solutions)
3-3.30pm	4-4.30pm	5-5.30pm	● Individual reflection on learning and complete practice-learning log ● Posting messages on the gratitude board ● Mindfulness breathing

GPN = general practice nurse

Students used a practice-learning log to set a daily goal with their practice supervisor. They also wrote reflections on actions and outcomes and received feedback from their practice assessor.

Students completed a survey at the beginning and end of the placement. This revealed that they enjoyed the structure of the course and benefited from the resources provided and the mix of the virtual element and the GP surgery environment. Although 64% would have liked more days in the GP surgery, 100% thought they would be a better nurse because of the placement; 93% of students said they would now like to undertake a GP placement for their final placement and 100% said they would now consider a career in GP nursing. All students gave their physical and emotional wellbeing and professional resilience a higher rating at the end than the beginning. Students felt supported by their practice supervisors and assessors, and benefitted from their expertise and feedback. They reported that participating in the consultations helped build their confidence greatly, and they valued the opportunity to explore topics. They also appreciated having protected time to complete practice-assessment documentation.

Box 3 details the experiences of two nursing students who undertook the placement, as well as a digital practice assessor.

Lessons learnt

Through running the initial placement, we learnt several lessons for future iterations:

- A dedicated team that included an administrator was essential to oversee the educators' training and the quality of placements;
- A partnership approach maximised quality assurance and provided ongoing support for both educators and students;
- Conducting assessment virtually reduced the assessment load for GPNs;
- Preparing students on the digital days ensured they knew what to expect on the practice days and how to be proactive with their time;
- GP surgeries are more likely to host a student if they have previously hosted one – this sustains placement capacity.

All too often, the focus of student nursing placements is on the acute care setting. However, many of the Nursing and Midwifery Council's (2018) standards of proficiency can be achieved in primary care. Some of its annexe-B standards may be difficult to obtain; however, speaking

Box 3. Case studies from the project

Lauren Williams, children's nursing student

"I was unsure before starting the digital placement how this would work and whether I would gain much knowledge. Initially I faced the challenge of having to adapt my learning style, because the placement was primarily online and this was something I was not used to. However, I felt this [ultimately] benefitted me, as being online allows you to take time to ask questions [that] may not usually be answered in a busy practice setting.

This placement [...] allowed me to put into practice the skills I learnt through the online sessions, providing me with a sense of achievement.

This placement taught me good communication is vital when it comes to effective teamwork. Being placed in teams during the online sessions allowed me to develop my communication skills with others in nursing. The placement taught me the importance of being able to lead a group of individuals, reinforced by being given the opportunity to develop my skills through peer-supervision group work at the end of each week.

Before this placement, primary care was not a career path I had considered. However, I am now due to start my management placement in a GP surgery, with the aim of becoming a practice nurse [after] qualifying."

Memory Mutsvandiani, adult nursing student

"Being able to apply everything we learnt during the week to the GP placement was very beneficial. I was able to participate during procedures such as immunisations for babies, wound dressings and cervical screening. [...] But] for me, the one day a week in a GP [surgery] was not enough. I always came back home with a lot of unanswered questions. The pandemic meant lots of appointments were changed to a digital format, meaning less hands-on experience.

A key advantage was the assessors, who were always available to answer questions. Afterwards, I was elected as the student representative for digital primary care, which is nice to have on my CV. This placement has made me want to be a primary care nurse, because of continuity of care given to patients and early detection of conditions."

Sally Harris, practice assessor on the digital element of the placement

"Having the opportunity of dedicated one-to-one time with students was a very rich and rewarding experience, which enabled me to broaden my own knowledge and skills. As an experienced general practice nurse, I was able to share an authentic insight into working in general practice and the wider experiences of working within different healthcare settings.

Being able to offer students protected time for supportive conversations was a vital part [of] the success of the placement. The team approach to learning and the digital learning materials took the students away from being passive recipients of knowledge to a space where they were able to have meaningful, focused conversations to enhance their learning and development. [...] The students very quickly gained confidence with their interprofessional communication skills [through] nurturing conversations and feedback on their progress."

into urgent care areas would allow students to demonstrate the required knowledge and skills.

We have now delivered the GPN placement as a five-, seven- and nine-week placement. We have developed interactive virtual consultations to enable students to make decisions during a pre-recorded consultation, and 2-3 days per week are now spent in a GP surgery.

This innovative approach has increased placement capacity, prepared students to work in primary care and resulted in more students requesting primary care for their final-year placement. **NT**

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