



Development and evaluation of an online, interactive information and advice tool for pre-registration nursing students



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ABSTRACT

Attrition rates for student nurses on academic programmes is a challenge for UK Higher Education Institutions. Reasons for leaving a programme of study include personal, financial issues or practice placement experiences. Research has shown systematic and integrated support mechanisms may improve attrition rates and student experience.

This project explored the sources of, and support needs of nursing and allied health students, develop and evaluate an interactive online tool: 'SignpOST'. Enabling students to access '*the right support, at the right time, from the right place*'.

Focus groups were carried out with 14, 3rd year students and 8 academic staff including personal tutors, programme/module leaders. Thematic analysis of transcribed data under four key themes for support and advice: 1. Financial 2. Programme 3. Personal 4. Study/academic, found poor student knowledge and little clarity of responsibilities of academic staff and services leads to students sourcing support from the wrong place at the wrong time. Students valued the speed and accessibility of information from informal, programme specific Facebook groups. Conversely, there were also concerns about the accuracy of these. Further research into the use of informal Facebook groups may be useful along with additional evaluation of the SOS tool.

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Introduction

This project sought to develop a tool to provide advice and practical information to pre-registration nursing students throughout their programme. Easy and prompt access to advice and information may help to alleviate some of the stresses and practical problems experienced by student nurses and therefore can potentially contribute to improved attrition.

The relevance of attrition

Student nurse attrition is of great importance for United Kingdom (UK) and international Higher Education Institutions (HEI). RCN (2008) and Thomas (2012) estimate 42–44% of student nurses have considered leaving their programme of study, the

reasons for which are often difficult to measure. Attrition rates are estimated to be as high as 30% in some parts of the UK (Jelfs, 2013) meaning that in some areas, 30% of students leave their course prior to completion. There are implications, not only to the taxpayer but also to HEIs and to healthcare provision; relating to the overall number of practicing nurses.

The estimated cost to the UK taxpayer is £11,479 per student per year, and equates to approximately £57–99 million per year in total (Waters, 2006, 2008). This is not only of concern in the UK, a 5 year America study suggested that students who drop out of academic programmes may cost up to \$3 billion annually (Schneider and Yin, 2011).

The cost to HEIs is also apparent. Not only are there concerns relating to waste of academic resources, there are also potential financial penalties if HEIs do not have a minimum number of successful students at the end of their programme (Deary et al., 2003; Price, 2002; Prymachuk et al., 2009).

Furthermore, retaining students in nursing programmes is essential in order to maintain sufficient levels of staffing in the health and social care environment, and high dropout rates

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ultimately reduce the number of qualifying professionals; potentially contributing to staff shortages (Deary et al., 2003).

Factors affecting attrition and the role of information and advice

Student nurses do not reflect a 'traditional' HEI demographic. The average age of nursing students is 29 years with a high percentage of students over the age of 21. Also, pre-registration nursing programmes typically have a 89% female majority (RCN, 2008). This suggests that many nursing students enter their programme with diverse backgrounds, experience and personal circumstances. Many have children and family commitments and also work alongside their course (RCN, 2008; Bridges-Porter, 2008; Wray et al., 2010; Ascend Learning, 2012; Hamshire et al., 2012, 2013). Crombie et al. (2013) further highlight that the amount of time spent outside the university in a practice environment means the pre-registration nursing programme poses unique challenges to this student population. This may make it more difficult to access academic staff, practical information and support.

A wide range of literature has reported on factors affecting pre-registration attrition rates. Glossop (2001) and Pitt et al. (2012) conducted a review of literature that reflected this (Box 1).

More recent literature reports similar factors. Merkley (2015) conducted an evidence review that emphasised retention as a performance indicator on an international level. Furthermore, Merkley (2015) identified the impact of policy, university staff and clinical placements on retention; suggesting that there should be systematic and strategic approaches to improve support.

RCN (2008) highlighted 62% of those who had considered leaving their programme was as a result of financial difficulties e.g. having to work part time in addition to their full time programme, student bursaries and/or student loans. Many are not aware of the support that can be provided by the university with issues such as childcare or basic financial advice through student support services.

Merkley (2015), Hamshire et al. (2012, 2013) and Orton (2011) further indicated that lack of support on placements were often a 'tipping point' in deciding to leave their programme. Williamson et al. (2013) also found that students who do not [for whatever reason] engage with support services offered by the university are more likely to withdraw. As a result of these multiple factors there are a range of interventions and methods that may support and prevent students from leaving their programmes. However, it is known that structured, accessible and responsive support mechanisms can help (Ascend Learning, 2012; Williamson et al., 2013;

Box 1

Reasons for leaving

- Academic failure
- Personal or family reasons
- Wrong career choice
- Financial problems
- Travel
- Poor programme management
- Ill health
- Negative staff attitudes
- Programme pressures
- Inadequate pre-programme information
- Lack of support
- Theory–practice imbalance
- Placements

O'Donnell, 2011; Urwin et al., 2010; Hamshire et al., 2012, 2013; Merkley, 2015).

Students often have a 'build up' of a multitude of factors which cause stress, possibly resulting in withdrawal from a programme. Whilst on placement students also find it difficult to access university support systems, and may not know of the resources and systems available to help them. Cross sectional studies by Bowden (2008) and Shelton (2003) and qualitative interviews by Glogowska et al. (2007) and Rudel (2006) found that access to support and advice was a key factor for programme retention. Brodie et al. (2004) also suggest that a perceived lack of support whilst on placement also contributed. Therefore, there is evidence to suggest that support and advice during the programme may have an impact on retention.

Conversely, finding interventions which aim to support multiple factors are likely to be more effective in supporting the complex issues faced by nursing students (Ascend Learning, 2012; Hamshire et al., 2012, 2013; Wray et al., 2010; Jelfs, 2013; Urwin et al., 2010; Merkley, 2015; Harris et al., 2014), and often easily accessible support and information about what to do and how to do it is all that is needed.

In response, this project aimed to explore how our most experienced student nurses have sought information throughout their programme and identify any barriers or challenges associated with this. As a result an interactive, online support and advice tool was developed and evaluated.

Aims & objectives

1. **'the right information, at the right time, in the right place'** **Explore and identify** how third year student nurses have experienced support and advice systems during their programme
2. **Analyse** qualitative data to identify overarching themes and sub-topics
3. **Develop and implement** an online, interactive support tool (SignpOST) to improve access to university, educator, study and personal support systems available
4. **Evaluate** the impact of the a pilot support tool

Method

A four phase mixed methods approach was used to gather qualitative information from focus groups of students and staff along with quantitative evaluation feedback on the developed online, interactive tool. The four phases intended to address the main objectives of the project: explore, analyse, develop and evaluate.

Sample and sampling frame

A convenience sample was used to recruit participants to focus groups. The University offers a range of health and social care programmes and three were focused upon for this project: pre-registration nursing (adult & mental health), occupational therapy and diagnostic radiography. Third year students were of particular interest as the explore phase of the project sought to identify:

- The types of information and advice that had been required throughout the three years of their programme
- Their experience and ease in accessing such information
- Any barriers or problems associated with obtaining this information/advice

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