



Learning and teaching in clinical practice

Skills for nursing practice: Development of clinical skills in pre-registration nurse education

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes during the past two decades have seen a growing challenge to prepare newly qualified nurses who are clinically competent and confident to meet the demands of contemporary healthcare. Recent publications emphasise the need to prioritise clinical skills in nurse education (DH 2012a, Francis, 2012). This discussion reports on a project scoping the clinical skills required within pre-registration nursing curricula and considers how this has influenced curriculum development at one Higher Education Institution in the UK.

This paper reports on the project analysis of nursing and healthcare policy, identifying six core themes of skills relevant for nursing practice. Furthermore it explores the findings of a series of focus groups with nursing practitioners and managers identifying priorities for clinical skills in the pre-registration curriculum. These highlighted a broad range of skills required of newly qualified practitioners, which pose a challenge for integration within nurse education. How this challenge has been addressed through the incorporation of these skills themes throughout a new pre-registration curriculum is also examined.

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Introduction

Supporting the development of practitioners' skills within pre-registration nursing education is complex. Curriculum changes in the United Kingdom (UK) have been driven by concerns that the right balance between theoretical and practical knowledge and skills has been elusive (Farrend et al., 2006; Kellehear, 2014). This has left concerns regarding the confidence and abilities of newly qualified nurses' in relation to clinical skills (Cubit and Ryan, 2011). The most recent focus on competency within nursing curricula in the UK represents a drive to address this concern and ensure that practitioners are clinically competent and confident to meet the demands of contemporary healthcare (Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) 2010). The NMC as the UK professional regulatory body has prescribed specific standards as a framework for all undergraduate nursing courses, however how each university delivers this framework is unique to that organization, thereby creating an opportunity for innovation and creation of a curriculum to

specifically meet local healthcare partner needs within this national framework.

The acquisition of these skills poses a number of challenges for nursing education across both practice and higher educational settings. Borneuf and Haigh (2010) highlight that one of the key issues which remains unaddressed is the artificial separation between practical skills development, critical thinking and clinical decision making. They point to the need to achieve much greater integration of practical and academic content to address the demands of nursing in contemporary healthcare environment. The vision for meeting these challenges and outlining the expert implementation of clinical skills within modern nursing practice is illustrated by the UK chief nursing officers statement that within a caring compassionate culture "all those in caring roles must have the ability to understand an individual's health and social care needs and the expertise, clinical and technical knowledge to deliver effective care and treatments based on research and evidence" (Department of Health (DH) 2012a, p.13).

In many respects the nursing profession sits on a threshold. Significant changes to the context of nursing work are anticipated; an ageing population, increasing diversification of care delivery environments, rapid technological developments, changing illness patterns and increasing involvement from the public are all predicted to play a central role in the development of nursing in the

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future (Longley et al., 2007; Maben and Griffiths, 2008; Royal College of Nursing (2011); Oliver et al., 2014). In a similar respect, nurse education in the UK has undergone significant changes in response to the 2010 standards for pre-registration nurse education from the Nursing and Midwifery Council. These standards signaled major developments for education in the UK with the requirement for graduate exit programmes only, at a minimum of Bachelors level, where previously many programmes were completed at Diploma level. This reflects the developing role of the nurse in this changing healthcare context (NMC, 2010; DH, 2012a).

This paper examines one aspect of developing a new pre-registration nursing curriculum within a Higher Education Institution in the UK. Recent publications show nursing cannot easily express what it is we do (DH, 2012a). The starting point for creating a new nursing programme was therefore to understand what practice skills are needed for newly qualified nurses in contemporary healthcare. The requirements of key health and educational stakeholders in the UK were examined through a scoping exercise including a literature review and focus groups. The findings of this project are explored in this discussion; it also articulates how these were integrated into the new pre-registration nursing curriculum.

The scoping project examining the skills required was conducted in two phases. Phase one consisted of a review of contemporary policy publications, completed during 2010–2011 to identify the key clinical skills required by the nursing workforce. Phase two involved focus groups undertaken with a range of nurse practitioners and nursing lecturers.

Scoping the policy

Policy publications were identified through searches on the Department of Health, Kings Fund and Nursing and Midwifery Council database and cross referencing of literature from each document. Key words used in the search included nursing skills, clinical skills, nursing roles, nurse education. The review aimed to be inclusive of all fields of nursing practice that students work towards for registration in the UK: namely, children's, learning disabilities, adult and mental health. Search terms were therefore combined with the title of each field, for example 'learning disabilities nursing skills'. Citations were reviewed to ensure resources relating to inpatient and community working was represented. Websites of non-statutory organisations linked with policy development relating to the client group of each field were also searched. Limits enable literature searches to be focused and relevant (Beecroft et al., 2010). Any policy outside its implementation period was excluded, alongside those that were more than six years old at the time of the review to ensure as much as possible that the appraisal reflected contemporary forward thinking requirements for these future graduates.

The project aimed to examine the skills required to practice as a newly qualified nurse. The practice of nursing is complex and requires abilities that extend beyond using psychomotor techniques to include clinical reasoning, judgment and communication (Benner, 2004). This broad conceptualisation of 'skills' informed the review also addressing Bonef and Haigh's (2010) criticism that within nurse education these aspects tend to be artificially separated.

Fifteen documents were identified for inclusion within the review which has been supplemented by a further four when updating the review for the development of curriculum specifications.

Secondary scoping phase

In addition to reviewing publications governing the development of nursing practice, it was important to gain an understanding

of how these integrate with the requirements for the future nursing workforce. Focus groups provide a valuable method of eliciting views and perspectives, allowing interaction between members to stimulate discussion and capture diverse perspectives (Goodman and Evans, 2010; May, 2011).

A series of focus groups were subsequently conducted with representatives of acute care, primary care and mental health and learning disabilities NHS Trusts to explore their perspectives on skills that should be a priority for pre-registration nurse education. These organisations were all practice partners of the HEI. Five focus groups were undertaken with practitioners. Participants in focus groups ($n = 38$) included; matrons, team leads, practice learning managers, workforce development planning managers, directors of nursing and clinical tutors. Participants were purposively selected due to their experience of employing newly qualified nurses and strategic workforce planning. Recruitment was undertaken via the practice learning management committee at the HEI.

Three focus groups were also conducted with nursing lecturers ($n = 15$) to explore their perceptions. Lecturers were recruited via an email from the pre-registration course director. Both NHS representatives and lecturers represented all fields of nursing and included teachers with specific roles to develop clinical skills teaching.

As Holland (2011) acknowledges ethical processes are essential to conducting small scale projects within education. Permission for the project was gained from the executive team at the division of nursing where the project was conducted as well as senior members of staff within the participating organisations. All participants were provided with a summary of the project before the groups and taking part was entirely voluntary. With the consent of the participants focus groups were audio-recorded. Any reference to discussions within reports and curriculum documents has been anonymised.

Analysis

Interpretations of both policy publications and focus group discussion were undertaken to develop a thematic analysis. For the policy review, appraisal of each document was conducted based on the Preview, Question, Read, Summarise method (Cronin et al., 2008). Documents were reviewed and recommendations relevant to skills, values and competencies for nurses were collated. Commonly occurring areas were identified and mapped across the documents into categories. This allows for patterns within the content to be noted (Aveyard, 2010). These were then combined into broader themes.

Audio-recordings of the groups were listened to and re-played. Following this sections that were deemed as relevant were transcribed to enable coding. Commonalities and differences across focus groups were noted and the transcribed sections were coded according to these emerging patterns which enables comparison across the groups (May, 2011). Similar categories were drawn together to form themes.

Overall, there was a consistent view across the trusts on the priorities for skills in the training of the future nursing workforce. Practitioner's views also reflected the themes outlined within the evaluation of the literature. Categories identified in the documents and focus groups were merged to create the final themes. These were:

- Professional Values
- Effectiveness
- Communication & Partnership
- Assessment
- Care Planning & Management

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