



Implementing service improvement projects within pre-registration nursing education: A multi-method case study evaluation



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ABSTRACT

Background: Preparing healthcare students for quality and service improvement is important internationally. A United Kingdom (UK) initiative aims to embed service improvement in pre-registration education. A UK university implemented service improvement teaching for all nursing students. In addition, the degree pathway students conducted service improvement projects as the basis for their dissertations. **Aim:** The study aimed to evaluate the implementation of service improvement projects within a pre-registration nursing curriculum.

Method: A multi-method case study was conducted, using student questionnaires, focus groups with students and academic staff, and observation of action learning sets. Questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS v19. Qualitative data were analysed using [Ritchie and Spencer's \(1994\)](#) Framework Approach. **Results:** Students were very positive about service improvement. The degree students, who conducted service improvement projects in practice, felt more knowledgeable than advanced diploma students. Selecting the project focus was a key issue and students encountered some challenges in practice. Support for student service improvement projects came from action learning sets, placement staff, and academic staff. **Conclusion:** Service improvement projects had a positive effect on students' learning. An effective partnership between the university and partner healthcare organisations, and support for students in practice, is essential.

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Introduction

Pre-registration nurse education programmes should prepare students for contemporary healthcare practice. Increasingly, United Kingdom (UK) health policies emphasise quality improvement and innovation within the National Health Service (NHS) ([Department of Health \[DH\] 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010](#)). A national initiative from the UK's NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement (NHSI) aimed that service improvement would be embedded in pre-registration healthcare curricula ([Tribal Consulting, 2009](#)). This

article explains one university's implementation of service improvement projects as the basis for nursing students' dissertations, and presents the results from a multi-method evaluation of the first group's experiences.

Background

In the UK, pre-registration nursing courses must ensure that students meet the Nursing and Midwifery Council's (NMC) standards. The [NMC's \(2004\)](#) standards for proficiency, with a diploma being the minimal academic qualification, were replaced in 2010 with new standards with a degree as the minimum requirement. The standards' domain for leadership, management and team-working, specifically refers to quality improvement and service development competencies ([NMC, 2010](#)). Quality improvement includes various models, one of which, service improvement, is concerned with improving patient care through a particular focus on systems and processes ([Henderson and McKillop, 2008](#)). The use

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of service improvement methodology reflects the view that quality in care is often determined at organisational rather than individual level (Berwick, 1996).

In the UK, there has been an increasing drive towards embedding improvement within the NHS, supported by the NHSI. For example, in 2008, following an initial pilot, an NHSI initiative called 'Productive ward: Releasing time to care' was rolled out across NHS health systems (termed 'NHS Trusts' in the UK). Wilson (2009) explained that the 'Productive Ward' programme aims to create productive organisations and enable staff to spend more time caring for patients, leading to better outcomes, improved patient and staff satisfaction and a cultural change for the workforce. Traditionally, service improvement was not included in UK pre-registration healthcare curricula (Tribal Consulting, 2009) but the benefits of educating health professionals about service improvement have now been recognised (Ling et al., 2010). Embedding service improvement into pre-registration education should better prepare future practitioners with key healthcare practice skills and promote service improvement as being central to their roles (Christiansen et al., 2010).

In 2006, the UK's NHSI launched a national initiative which aimed to ensure that all healthcare students would understand service improvement and have acquired related skills prior to registration (Tribal Consulting, 2009). The initiative was introduced in three phases. In Phase 1, three universities piloted the teaching of service improvement with pre-registration students from varied healthcare professions. In Phase 2, six more universities joined the initiative and in Phase 3, a further 18 universities implemented service improvement in their curricula. Students at the Phase 1 universities evaluated the pilot very positively, although only 8 per cent had applied their learning in practice at the point of evaluation (Johnson et al., 2010). Students' perceived that barriers to applying service improvement in practice included: staff unwillingness or inability to change ways of working, insufficient resources in the NHS with not enough time or staff, and the student's lack of status. Christiansen et al. (2010) reported on a descriptive survey of nursing students' experiences of service improvement learning at a Phase 2 university. In contrast to Johnson et al.'s (2010) results, the students reported that practice settings were receptive to their projects. The authors concluded that service improvement learning seems acceptable, effective and valued by students. Tribal Consulting (2009) conducted a multi-method evaluation of Phase 3, including all the participating universities. Students evaluated service improvement education well and there was some evidence of application of theory to practice despite barriers encountered.

Implementation of service improvement projects

The authors' university joined the national project at Phase 3; Table 1 presents the timeline and structures for implementation, following the 2009 pre-registration nursing curriculum approval, and the preparation for academic staff, NHS staff and placements, and the first student cohort. The curriculum had two pathways: advanced diploma and degree. All students learned service improvement methods during the course. The degree students also conducted a service improvement project, as the basis for their dissertations. Their projects were conducted in their first practice placement in year three. The students' practice placements were in wards, units or community teams within the NHS Trusts that were linked with the university: two acute hospital Trusts, two mental health Trusts, one integrated hospital and community Trust, and two community Trusts. The students attended two action learning sets (ALSs) each during their nine week placement. Action learning is based on the principle that people learn most effectively when working on current problems within their own work environment

Table 1

Timeline and structures for service improvement project implementation with the first student cohort.

January–July 2010	Service improvement workshops for academic staff and key NHS Trust staff Teams of academic and NHS Trust staff conducted three pilot service improvement projects, to develop familiarity with service improvement methodology
April 2010–September 2011	Steering group meetings held with academic, NHS Trust staff and student representatives
July 2010	Service improvement introduced to all students: quality and improvement, process mapping tools
July 2010–ongoing	Mentorship courses and updates, and NHS Trust partnership days, introduced mentors to student service improvement projects and the mentor's support role
September–October 2010	Further teaching on service improvement: all students introduced to service improvement methods including the Plan-Do-Study-Act model (Langley et al., 2009) Degree students prepared for doing service improvement projects in practice Mentors on degree students' placements prepared, with mentor handbooks and link tutor visits
October–December 2010	Degree students conducted service improvement projects during their nine week practice placements Students attended ALSs in weeks 3 and 7
January–June 2011	Students prepared dissertations based on their projects, with dissertation supervisor support.

(Raelin, 1997). In the UK, student nurses' practice learning is supervised and assessed by mentors who are registered nurses who have undergone NMC-approved mentorship preparation (NMC, 2008). Mentors play an essential role in practice learning, providing learning opportunities and supporting students' development of competence (Papp et al., 2003; Brammer, 2008). The students' placement mentors and ALS facilitators verified support for the student's service improvement project ideas. Another aspect of the practice learning support in the UK is that academic staff provide links between the university and the practice setting: the 'link tutor' role. For this project, link tutors helped to prepare the practice placements where the degree students would undertake their service improvement projects. They were also an additional source of support to the students while they were on placement.

Rationale for evaluation

Implementation of service improvement teaching within pre-registration courses is relatively new within the UK and there is little known about how pre-registration students experience service improvement learning within the university and practice setting (Christiansen et al., 2010.) There are few published evaluations and application of service improvement learning to practice seems to have been variable and not usually mandatory. The authors are unaware of any other pre-registration courses where service improvement projects have formed the basis for nursing degree dissertations. All these factors provided the impetus to conduct an evaluation.

Method

Aim and objectives

The aim was to evaluate the implementation of service improvement within a pre-registration nursing curriculum. The objectives were to:

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