



Supernumerary status – An unrealised ideal

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Summary Supernumerary status, for pre-registration student nurses, should have fundamentally changed the way they learn in practice. Research suggests, however, that for many students the apprenticeship model still exists and that supernumerary status has created new challenges for learning in practice. Common themes found in the literature on supernumerary status are: confusion over the meaning of supernumerary status, the effect of supernumerary status on becoming part of the team, importance of the mentor, power relationships and operationalising supernumerary status. These themes are explored further with reference to the international literature and recommendations made as to how nurse education can respond to the challenges posed in order to ensure the quality of student learning in practice.

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Introduction

The implementation of supernumerary status, following the move of nurse education into tertiary education, should have fundamentally changed the way that students learn in practice. However, a number of recent studies suggest that for many students the apprenticeship model still exists, with

supernumerary status creating new challenges for learning in practice, rather than enhancing it.

Nolan (1998) suggests that the quality of the clinical experience will have a significant impact on the student's ability to integrate theory with practice and develop the appropriate practical and professional skills required as a registered nurse. If the benefits of supernumerary status are not being realised then the quality of the clinical learning experience will be compromised and this should be a concern for nurse education.

This paper reviews the literature on supernumerary status and the student experience in practice in

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an effort to understand why the benefits have not been realised and how nurse education can respond in order that the quality of student learning in practice can be enhanced.

The background to supernumerary status

The apprenticeship model dominated nurse education for the greater part of the twentieth century. Students spent the majority of their time in practice where they worked as part of the nursing team, learning from a 'skilled master'. In reality, being counted in the off-duty meant that priority was given to the work to be done rather than meeting the learning needs of the students (White et al., 1993). Learning was found to be haphazard and depended on the importance each ward placed upon student learning, with the ward sister playing a key role in the quality of student learning (Ogier, 1982; Pembrey, 1980). Studies found that students spent a lot of time working either alone or with other students or health care assistants (Jacka and Lewin, 1987; Melia, 1984) with little teaching taking place on the wards (Reid, 1985). Melia's (1987), study on the socialisation of students in nursing described how 'Fitting in', 'Learning the rules' and 'Getting the work done' were common strategies used by students to survive in practice. In essence, students were workers not learners.

The apprenticeship model emphasised 'know how' rather than 'know that'. Based on a behaviourist paradigm, learning was often unstructured and task oriented, with students gaining experience in, rather than learning in and from practice (Flanagan et al., 2000). In addition, the power relationship with the master-apprentice system had the potential to lead to a teacher-directed approach to learning with the student a passive participant (Slevin, 1992). Recognition that this model would not produce the type of professional required to meet the future demands of a rapidly changing healthcare system meant a new approach was required (McMillan and Dwyer, 1989) and led to the transfer of nurse education into tertiary education and the implementation of supernumerary status. The aim of supernumerary status was to enable students to 'become increasingly self-directed as the educational programme progresses and ... explore areas of skill & knowledge on an individual basis' (United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC), 1986, p. 55), resulting in a knowledgeable doer who would challenge the prevalent routines and norms (Watkins, 2000).

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Project 2000 curriculum (UKCC, 1986) was implemented during the early 1990s with an 18 month Common Foundation Programme (CFP) followed by an 18 month branch programme where students specialised in adult, child, mental health or learning disability nursing. Students had supernumerary status for all but the final 20% of their time in practice, which was known as rostered service.

In 1999, the UKCC Commission on Nursing and Midwifery Education reported on their evaluation of Project 2000 (UKCC, 1999) which led to further changes, in particular the extension of supernumerary status for the whole programme.

The transfer into tertiary education changed the relationship between education and service, particularly with respect to the responsibility for student learning in practice. Whilst in some countries (e.g. UK, Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Scandinavia) clinical staff have responsibility for supporting and assessing students in practice with support from nurse educators, in other countries the responsibility has become that of nurse education alone (e.g. Australia, Canada, USA, Iran) with a nurse educator or clinical instructor following the students into practice to supervise and assess them.

Supernumerary status – a literature review

All the studies that focus on supernumerary status come from the UK and ROI (apart from Mashaba's (1994) study from South Africa) and use mainly qualitative methods, with the inherent weaknesses of small sample sizes and lack of generalisability. However, the similarity between the findings suggests they are worth paying attention to. Whilst supernumerary status has realised benefits for some students allowing them to focus on their specific learning needs, the literature focuses more on the problems it has engendered and forms the focus for this review. Common themes in the studies are shown in Table 1.

These themes are explored further in relation to the international literature to determine whether the issues identified in Table 1 are unique to the UK and ROI and to identify recommendations for responding to the problems being encountered.

Confusion over supernumerary status

Confusion over the interpretation of supernumerary status is common to the studies from the UK

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