



## Don't go with the 'FLO' – a student mobile texting service to enhance nursing student retention



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The review undertaken revealed that there is an abundance of literature concerning retention and the high levels of attrition among undergraduate students and of relevance here, nurse education. The study undertaken evaluated the use of mobile phone automated texts designed to provide information, support and reassurance to help alleviate the stress and anxieties that some undergraduate nursing students experience during the early phase of their studies and which can lead to some students leaving their programme.

**Objective:** The objective of the study was to evaluate how use of automated mobile phone texts, using a system known as FLO, could usefully supplement pastoral support, as an intervention to reduce attrition among undergraduate nursing students.

**Design:** A qualitative and quantitative evaluation was conducted using an open-ended questionnaire designed specifically for the study.

**Participants:** The sample were two cohorts of undergraduate first year student nurses ( $n = 178$ ). Of these 123 (69%) signed up to FLO and 77 (63%) completed the evaluation form.

**Methods:** The evaluation form that was administered in a classroom situation one week after use of FLO had ceased. Data were analysed through use of a descriptive statistics and thematic analysis approaches.

**Results:** A range of key themes emerged from the analysis including that text messages were helpful and supportive, increased a sense of belonging to the University and encouraged retention. There were some unresolved issues concerning the costs incurred by participants when sending reply text messages.

**Conclusions:** It is concluded that FLO or use of similar mobile phone protocols can be a useful addition to approaches to improve undergraduate nursing student retention rates.

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## 1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is an evaluation of the use of FLO to improve undergraduate student nurse retention. FLO is a Short Messaging Service (SMS) originally designed as an NHS Telehealth service to send patients automated texts which give guidance and information about their medical condition (Cottrell et al., 2012a, 2012b). Within the NHS, FLO has been used to help patients manage their own (Cottrell et al., 2012a, 2014, 2015a, 2015b) and to be acceptable to patients (Cottrell et al., 2012b).

This study explored the use of FLO for the first time in an educational non-medical setting aimed at enhancing retention in a cohort of first

year of Level 4 Nursing students. FLO was adapted to send mobile phone automated texts to participating students providing information, support and reassurance to help alleviate the stress and anxieties that students often experience in the early stages of their studies. Such stressors can sometimes lead to students leaving their course prematurely, or lead to increases in student attrition rates.

## 2. Literature Review

The Higher Education Academy (2015) refers to retention as being when students remain in one Higher Education Institute and successfully complete their programme of study within a specific time period, whereas attrition refers to students who leave early without successfully completing their educational programme. General university attrition rates reported by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (2015) among first year undergraduate students studying at English Universities was 5.7% in 2012/13. However, in comparison to other Higher Education undergraduate programmes nurse education attrition rates are

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relatively poor. For example, [Buchan and Seccombe \(2011\)](#) in a labour force review conducted for the Royal College of Nursing describe how across England, Scotland and Wales attrition in nurse education is high and rising. From 21,338 students who began courses in 2005, 5885 left before completion, an attrition rate of 27.6% compared with 26.3% in 2008 and 24.8% in 2006. Later estimates have improved a little, for example, in the Shape of Caring review ([Willis, 2015](#)) it is reported that the average attrition rate for student nurses in England is 20%. Nevertheless, the Willis review still recommends that an urgent evaluation is needed as to why student nurses leave their programmes prematurely, in order to stop NHS education funding being wasted. However, as [Jinks et al. \(2014\)](#) relates, it is salutary to remember that attrition is not just costly for economic reasons as it also represents a substantial loss of investment in time and money for the students concerned and their families.

A note of caution is needed however, as accurate calculation of Higher Education attrition rates is reported by a number of authors to be notoriously difficult. For example, [Deary et al. \(2003\)](#) describes how the lack of an agreed definition of attrition is problematic. [Cook \(2010\)](#) also recounts, that the absence of a common method for calculating attrition across programmes of study and degrees makes it difficult to analyse attrition throughout Higher Education sector. Similarly [Glossop \(2001\)](#) highlights the complex methodological issues involved in measuring nursing student attrition rate include use of a comparable format. For example, such things as databases not tracking individuals who change courses, or students who had deferred their studies or change from a full-time to a part-time mode of study are some of the difficulties identified. Another major methodological limitation when studying student attrition are difficulties in ascertaining the reasons why students prematurely leave their programmes ([Dodge et al. 2009](#)). For example, contacting those who have discontinued may be difficult and surveys sent to students often suffer from low response rates ([Glossop, 2001](#)). Furthermore, many of the post-leaving inventories used to collect data are often limited with imprecise definitions of reasons for leaving used. Thus data obtained as a result is not reliable enough to draw meaningful conclusions ([Deary et al., 2003](#)).

Nevertheless, some authors do give possible reasons why some undergraduate students leave their programmes early. For example, [Thomas \(2002\)](#) gives financial reasons such as hardship and accumulating debt for Higher Education students generally. However, in nursing there are additional stressors related to the nature of the occupation and student exposure to the realities of professional practice when undertaking clinical placements. For example, nurse education as stressful and anxiety provoking is reported by authors such as [Thomas et al. \(2012\)](#) who undertook a systematic review of the subject area. Thomas et al. outline the difficulties that many nursing students have coping with clinical practice and the impact this has on attrition rates. Thomas et al. undertook a systematic review of ten relevant qualitative studies and identified five cross-cutting themes of which stress and coping was related to all the synthesised themes. Disillusionment and disappointment was also reported when many of the students studied were first exposed to the reality of the clinical environment. [Hamshire et al. \(2012\)](#) also describes how dissatisfaction and difficulties around clinical placements acting as a tipping point that precipitated the departure of many students.

There are a number of studies that focus on the efficacy of different approaches to reduce attrition and improve retention. Some studies concentrate on recruitment strategies and better selection procedures and their effects on improving attrition rates. For example, [Gillen \(2012\)](#) looks at introducing tighter selection processes in student nurse recruitment. A number of studies also examine student support mechanisms. [Whitehead \(2002\)](#) identifies that nursing loses a large numbers of its students due to student failure to attain the academic standards required. In a study of the academic writing experiences of student nurses Whitehead singled out the need for a greater emphasis

on academic support throughout the whole period of a student nurses' education programme.

Others have examined the pastoral support for student nurses and its effects on improving student nurse retention. For example [Banks et al. \(2012\)](#) conducted a survey in three Scottish Universities concerning student nurse retention, concluding good pastoral support had a positive impact on retention. In addition some students that participated in Banks et al.'s study reported that they would have left had they not received 'good' pastoral support. Similarly [Pellatt \(2006\)](#) identifies that clinical practice mentors play a vital role in supporting student nurses in practice and [Levett-Jones and Lathlean \(2008\)](#) that fostering a sense of belonging is a prerequisite for successful learning in clinical practice.

It can be concluded from this albeit brief review of the literature that there is plentiful literature concerning retention and attrition in undergraduate nurse education. Attrition rates in nursing in Willis's view are unacceptably high. Any failure to complete an educational programme has economic consequences for funding bodies and universities. Unsuccessful completion also comes with a personal cost; trauma, embarrassment and self-esteem. The background literature gave the impetus for the research conducted and its aim to examine how use of automated mobile phone texts using a system known as FLO could provide a useful supplement to the pastoral support currently offered to undergraduate nursing at the University where the study was undertaken.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Aim

The aim of the study was to evaluate how use of automated mobile phone texts, using a system known as FLO, could usefully supplement pastoral support, as an intervention to reduce attrition among undergraduate nursing students.

#### 3.2. Context

The study was undertaken in 2014 in a post-1992 university located in central England. In line with the literature review findings, highest levels of attrition among undergraduate nursing students at this University are those in the early phases of their studies. A Short Message System (SMS) protocol was therefore developed covering the first 12 weeks of the students' programme. The text messages consisted of a mix of: interactive text messages, where a response was required from the student and information only texts, where no response was required from the student. The messages were designed to be sent from week 2 to week 12 of the students' programme, on different days of the week, including weekends, and at various times during the day and early evening between 10.30 and 19.00 h. One or two text messages were sent each week covering matters such as; guidance to where students could access support; reminders to the participants to see their personal tutors, and; information about university activities. Examples of the text messages sent are given in table one. The system was programmed to provide an alert when a student responded with a concern such as anxiety about an aspect of their programme.

#### 3.3. Recruitment and Sampling

The prospective participants were a self-selected sample from two cohorts of nursing students, all of whom were informed about the project during an interactive question and answer session with a member of the FLO Team. The information given was supplemented through use of a written study information sheet. It was made clear that the FLO project was not part of core curriculum, that students could choose whether to participate in the project or not, and if they decided not to take part they would suffer no penalties or be treated differently to their peers. They were also told that FLO would be free and they

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