These terrifying three words: A qualitative, mixed methods study of students' and mentors' understandings of 'fitness to practise'

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is little empirical published research pertaining to fitness to practise and pre-registration nursing students. Much of the existing fitness to practise literature focuses on medical students and there is a preponderance of literature reviews and descriptive or discursive papers.
Objectives: The multicentre study aimed to explore students' and mentor's understandings of fitness to practise processes in pre-registration nursing programmes.
Design: A qualitative study in the interpretive paradigm with interpretive analysis involving 6 focus groups and 4 face-to-face interviews with nursing students and mentors.
Setting: Eleven Higher Education Institutions providing pre-registration nursing education in the UK. Data were collected January 2014–March 2015 following ethical approval.
Participants: Purposive sampling was used to recruit mentors and nursing (but not midwifery) students from pre-registration nursing programmes at different stages of educational preparation.
Methods: Qualitatively driven semi-structured focus groups (n = 6) and interviews (n = 4) were conducted with a total of 35 participants (17 pre-registration nursing students and 18 nursing mentors).
Results: Three themes identified from the student and mentor data are considered: *Conceptualising Fitness to Practise*; *Good Health and Character*; *and Fear and Anxiety Surrounding Fitness to Practise Processes.*
Conclusions: Uncertainty about understandings of fitness to practise contributed to a pervasive fear among students and reluctance among mentors to raise concerns about a student's fitness to practise. Both students and mentors expressed considerable anxiety and engaged in catastrophic thinking about fitness to practise processes. Higher Education Institutes should reinforce to students that they are fit to practise the majority of the time and reduce the negative emotional loading of fitness to practise processes and highlight learning opportunities.

1. Introduction

Protection of the public is a key objective of pre-registration nursing education, meeting Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) standards and risk monitoring requirements (NMC, 2010). How pre-registration nursing students and nursing mentors conceptualise and understand fitness to practise (FtP) for nursing students during educational preparation is explored in this paper. The findings are discussed in terms of three themes: *Conceptualising Fitness to Practise, Good Health and Character*, and *Fear and Anxiety surrounding FtP Processes*, and we identify ways for improving students' understandings of FtP.

2. Background

In 2009, the NMC set standards requiring UK Higher Education Institutes (HEI) to establish processes to monitor the FtP of pre-registration nursing students. FtP is defined by the NMC (2015) as nurses possessing "the skills, knowledge, good health and good character to do their job safely and effectively." Subsequently, UK HEIs have developed various strategies to meet these requirements (Unsworth, 2011). A study of Scottish HEIs' FtP processes identified examples of good practice in the monitoring of FtP (Haycock-Stuart et al., 2014; MacLaren et al., 2016) but also revealed that HEIs have encountered significant challenges around FtP and that there are gaps in current knowledge about FtP and pre-registration nursing students, including how students and mentors understand and experience FtP processes.

There is a large policy literature relating to FtP and the regulation of health and social care practitioners, although standards, advice, and guidance on FtP for health and social care students vary as to detail and devolution to HEIs (Haycock-Stuart et al., 2014; MacLaren et al., 2016). In contrast, there is little empirical published research pertaining

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to FtP and pre-registration nursing students, and literature reviews by Jomeen et al. (2008) and Boak et al. (2012) identify that much of the existing FtP literature consists of literature reviews and descriptive or discursive papers.

Empirical papers address two major themes around FtP and pre-registration nursing students: *Conceptualising FtP* and *Describing and developing FtP processes* (see Table 1). The concept of FtP and its underpinning constructs of good health and good character have been problematised (Jomeen et al., 2008; Sellman, 2007), and it has been argued that ambiguity around these central concepts may lead to disability discrimination and poor quality FtP processes (Sin and Fong, 2008).

Pre-registration nursing students face many similar FtP-related issues to registered nurses, e.g. using social networking websites (Griffith, 2012), but there are also unique aspects to student FtP, most notably students' developmental position as learners (including learning about FtP). Devereux et al. (2012) found widespread misunderstanding among pre-registration students about FtP, which was connected to a fear of stigma and failure to disclose health conditions to the HEI. MacLaren et al. (2016) identified that while HEIs had processes for informing students about FtP, some HEI representatives reported that students' understanding of FtP was inadequate. Anxiety surrounding FtP processes is acknowledged in the literature (Devereux et al., 2012; Disability Rights Commission, 2007; Ellis et al., 2011), but there are little empirical data about students' understandings and experiences of FtP. At the same time, the role of mentors in student FtP is largely absent from the literature. There is therefore a clear need to create a more robust evidence base around FtP for pre-registration nursing students.

3. Methods

The study explored students' and mentor's understandings of FtP processes in pre-registration nursing programmes in Scotland. This research builds on an earlier study elucidating FtP processes in Scottish HEIs (Haycock-Stuart et al., 2014; MacLaren et al., 2016). The study design is located in the interpretive paradigm and uses qualitative mixed methods: focus groups and semi-structured interviews (Brannen, 2005). The qualitatively driven mixed methods approach focuses on complexities of context, experience, and meaning, enhancing depth of understanding without excluding other ways of knowing (Creswell et al., 2006; Hall and Ryan, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2010). We argue that this approach elucidates the complexities of FtP through macro-level practices (e.g. implementing NMC FtP guidance across the 11 HEIs within a specific geopolitical region), and micro-program-level practices (e.g. student and mentor evaluating the student's FtP).

Mixed methods promote a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship across national and local processes for ascertaining and ensuring FtP. The focus groups produced interesting discussions among the participants and highlighted areas of ambiguity and differences of opinion, while interviews offered participants the opportunity to share more personal information about their experiences of FtP processes.

3.1. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the principal investigator's HEI Research Ethics Committee, and evidence of this supplied to all the HEIs involved. Further internal approval was required by three HEIs to conduct research with their students. Approval to conduct the study with mentors was obtained from local NHS Research and Development departments.

3.2. Access, Recruitment, and Sample

Access to recruit nursing students to the study was sought from the eleven HEIs that provide pre-registration nursing programmes in Scotland during October 2014–January 2015. From December 2014–February 2015, the study information sheet was widely distributed through nine HEI contacts to pre-registration nursing students across Scotland.

The study was advertised to nursing mentors through HEI contacts in four health boards in different parts of Scotland. Purposive sampling was used to recruit nursing students and mentors to 4 and 2 focus groups, respectively. Semi-structured focus groups (n = 6) and interviews (n = 4) were conducted with a total of 35 participants (17 pre-registration nursing students and 18 nursing mentors). Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Pre-registration students from various specialities and different stages of their education participated. There was no requirement for students to have personal experience of FtP processes, but some students were recruited who had been through their HEI's processes.

Limitations to the recruitment process included the following factors: information was cascaded by teaching staff, which may have affected students' decisions to take part; students experiencing a high research demand (e.g. National Student Survey); competing teaching and placement schedules; recruitment coincided with the Christmas vacation. FtP can be a sensitive issue and this might have affected decisions not to participate, despite confidentiality being assured. The timing of the project limited opportunities for some mentors to take part within the timescale of the project. Despite these recruitment limitations, purposive sampling was achieved (Haycock-Stuart et al., 2015).

Table 1
Key themes with examples from nursing literature and related literature.

Themes:	Empirical papers	Literature reviews	Discussion papers	Policy documents
Conceptualising FtP • Conceptualising good health and good character • Conceptualising professionalism • Student understandings of FtP	*Nursing students*: Devereux et al. (2012) Sin and Fong (2008) *Students from other disciplines*: Currer and Atherton (2008)	Jomeen et al. (2008)	Sellman (2007)	Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence (2009) Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence (2008) Disability Rights Commission (2007)
Describing and developing FtP processes • Developing FtP processes in HEIs • Challenges for HEIs in monitoring and maintaining student FtP	*Nursing students*: Devereux et al. (2012) Holland et al. (2010) Sin and Fong (2008) Tee and Jowett (2009) Unsworth (2011) *Students from other disciplines*: Sanders and Taylor (2013) Roff and Dherwani (2011)	Boak et al. (2012)	David and Lee-Woolf (2010) Ellis et al. (2011)	Nursing and Midwifery Council (2011) Nursing and Midwifery Council (2011)