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Title: *'Behind the scenes' - student nurse experience of their involvement in curriculum development.*

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Abstract

Background: Stakeholder involvement is a requirement in UK nursing curriculum development but there are no papers that focus solely on the participation of student nurses in their programme development

Method: Six curriculum development focus group meetings were held with current pre-registration nursing students in addition to monthly writing groups with our wider stakeholder representatives. All attended the course approval event. The students describe their experience and learning from this process and themes are identified.

Results: The themes which emerged were 'safe space'; 'facilitative engagement'; 'student participant learning and development'; 'organisation and management'; 'the joy of being part of it' and 'doing this during a pandemic'.

Conclusion: The lived experience of learning disability student nurse curriculum developers informs both pedagogical and organisational issues. It is a unique opportunity for students to gain knowledge and skills in communication and the mechanisms of curriculum development within a partnership group.

Keywords: Curriculum development, Nursing, Student involvement, Student experience, Stakeholder participation.

Title: *'Behind the scenes' - student nurse experience of their involvement in learning disability pre-registration nursing curriculum development.*

Introduction

This paper focusses on the role of nursing students as collaborative curriculum developers and their feedback on the experience. The six student nurses involved in the evaluation are also co-authors.

Nurse education in the United Kingdom (UK) is governed by the Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) and is delivered across 4 fields (Adult, Children and Young People, Learning Disability and Mental Health). There are two levels of graduate registration; Registered Nurse (at Bachelors or Masters level) and Registered Nursing Associate, which is generic and at Foundation Degree Level. The host university assembled a team of academics, practitioners, service users (patients), carers and student

nurses to co-develop a Bachelors level programme which was an additional field of nursing (Learning Disability). The whole project was carried out entirely through online meetings.

Background

The UK Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) are clear that new nursing programmes are designed, developed, delivered, evaluated, and co-produced with stakeholders, including students (NMC, 2018) yet few published works focus solely on the student experience. This curriculum was developed between November 2020 and April 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst Universities were closed, and education was offered 'online' (Haslam, 2021).

The programme was designed to meet the NMC education standards (2018) and was a modification to an existing pre-registration nursing programme. The cross-field modules were adapted to meet the needs of the additional field and the timetabling arrangements made provision for additional, field specific learning groups. The new field specific modules share similar learning outcomes and assessments with the other fields for parity, however there is field specific content. The new learning disability modules were developed in line with the university mapping of the NMC standards (2018) with input from practice and service user / carer partners to inform the content. The students were involved in sharing their experiences and suggesting amendments developing assessment materials and the wording of learning outcomes to aid understanding. They also advised on the structuring of the modules based on their experiences of what had worked well on other modules, such as the inclusion of themed weeks and the linking of classroom theory with lab based clinical skills sessions.

Separate stakeholder events and curriculum planning meetings, held remotely, were attended by service staff, carers, academics, and student nurses. These included volunteers from the university service user and carer group with lived experience of learning disability, autism and acquired brain injury. Practice staff included registered learning disability nurses from a range of local services including community learning disability teams for adults and children, hospital liaison teams and inpatient services. Educators included academics and also practice education managers, practice education facilitators (PEFs), assessors and supervisors. Representatives from each of these groups brought their feedback to the writing group meetings. Senior Trust staff advised regarding recruitment targets to meet the local learning disability nursing workforce need. Twelve pre-registration nursing students from different years and fields of nursing were involved, three of whom were deployed into the NHS workforce under emergency standards (NMC, 2020a), hence were both employees and students at the same time (Health Education England, 2020; Swift et al, 2020). This paper will now focus exclusively on the experience of these student nurses.

Method

Student participation in a series of 5 focus groups was co-ordinated by the School of Nursing President (Charly, a third-year student nurse), who ensured representation from all three years and the three existing fields of nursing practice (Adult, Children and Young People and Mental Health). It was not possible to include existing pre-registration learning disability nursing students as we were developing this as a new field but we did include 2 student nursing associate volunteers who worked in the learning disability field and who were able to bring their practice experience to the group. A range of times were offered including evenings to ensure that students could attend at least some of the sessions even if they were on placement. All the student volunteers attended at least one meeting; eleven students attended at least two meetings. Representatives from the student focus group also joined the writing group of academics, service users and carers, practitioners, and practice educators and were invited to the programme approval event with the NMC panel.

A further focus group gave feedback on their experiences, five of the twelve students attended and one student offered written feedback. Transcriptions were thematically analysed by 2 academics, separately, before determining the results. We did this as we would for 'research' despite this being an evaluation, in order to provide the experience of utilising research methods for the student nurses, and to remove bias.

Results

Here, we present the words of the six student nurses, thematically arranged. To offer insight into their experience these themes are 'Safe space', 'student participant learning & development', 'organisation and management', 'the joy of being part of' and 'doing this during a pandemic'.

Safe space

As academics, we had some concerns that there could be a power imbalance, or that students might not feel safe to voice their opinions. This was clearly not the case:

"It was an open forum, sometimes talking to lecturers and highly qualified people, people can be a little bit reticent in case they say the wrong thing," Bhavnita (3rd year Adult nursing student)

"This has been great because everyone has been listened to and points taken into consideration ... there's no wrong answers" Angela (1st year MH nursing student)

Facilitative Engagement

Engaging student nurses in extra-curricular activities is often a challenge, due to the multifaceted nature of a nursing programme and the too often need to also work in paid employment. This was unfamiliar territory, so long notice periods and explanatory material were provided for the students:

"We were informed of the process, able to ask questions ... and to step back from the project if required due to studies and placement workloads. There was good communication....and support from staff was outstanding throughout." Charly (3rd year CYP student)

Indeed, rather than overwhelming the students, they described it as an 'honour' to be involved:

"I was really honoured to be honest, I felt appreciated" Hani (2nd year Adult nursing student)

"... it's been an honour to be involved" Angela

Organisation and management

Like all University events, experience rested on the organisation and management of proceedings. Meetings were arranged around existing timetables and communications included clear agendas and connections with University and NMC guidance for course approval.

"The whole process went very smoothly; considerations were given to students due to placement commitments for example". Charly

"For me it worked really well, it was well planned, well executed and we had plenty of notice in advance of all the meetings... I knew what I was doing, and I had time to research and look at the stuff I was going to bring back to the next meeting". Michelle (1st year MH nursing student)

"It's the first time I've been involved in anything like this, but it's been really interesting, really well organised, really informative, the information's been out in good time" Angela

Student learning & development

Whilst all voiced a sense of being privileged to be part of the curriculum development journey, their personal development was cited as the most beneficial part of the process:

"I've understood what it takes to get a module together. It's not as easy or straightforward as just what I want to do. There's a lot of thought goes into it, and it's been an eye opener."

Bhavnita

"This gave me a bigger insight into more aspects of pre-registration education and what goes on behind the scenes of course developments, what needs to be considered and the NMC standards for education." Charly

As Michelle says,

"It's a trade-off between meeting the needs of the awarding or governing body and being able for students to understand it and not put them off."

Hani, an international student, gained insight into other fields of nursing, which do not exist in her home country.

"I was the only international student I think in the group and it was such an amazing experience.... I'm from Kenya and I don't think they really put as much effort into non-physical disability. So, it was a bit of an eye opening, that there could be some disabilities that are not necessarily physical, and they need appreciation and for you to learn what they need" Hani (2nd year Adult nursing student)

Joy of being part of it

Students fed back that they enjoyed the process immensely:

"I wanted to say thank you for giving us these opportunities. When we started the placement I was in my first year and had little or no experience, but I was able to contribute... when the outcome came out that the programme had been approved it gladdened my heart because I was part of the history, being involved " Durotola (2nd year student)

"Thank you for letting us be a part of this. It has been a brilliant experience ... to bring in a new programme." Bhavnita

The experience of doing this during a pandemic

The changes to nurse education and the experience of meeting online brought benefits and challenges for the students:

"Friendly faces are important because you can't read people on Teams". Bhavnita

"We did the first 6 months theory... so we had not done any placements at that time ...so first years could not bring placement experience to the forums". Angela

[Meeting on Teams] *"allowed people to connect more...It was a lot more flexible."* Charly

Course approval event

All the students were invited to attend the online approval event as stakeholders over a day and half and panel members met with stakeholders in separate groups. Students were prepared for this meeting using information from the Quality Assurance Handbook (NMC, 2020b, p.67).

"I was quite nervous speaking to them and worried I might say something wrong or mess it up" Bhavnita

"I was quite nervous beforehand actually and didn't know what they were going to ask but they were quite personable and friendly, and I think they knew that we were going to be a little bit apprehensive". Angela

"At first it was a bit nerve wracking because everyone is in suits and everyone's camera is on and I thought it would be a bit more of an official meeting, a scary meeting". Hani

"I was a bit trepidatious and I like to be trepidatious because it keeps you on your toes...but I had read your sheet and I was happy The lay person was asking the hardest questions...I felt well prepared". Michelle

"It was a bit tense, and I felt nervous while I was waiting in the lobby ...but it was handled professionally.". Durotola

The final word on the experience is from Charly:

"I would definitely encourage more students to get involved, this is a great opportunity for student nurses to get a 'behind the scenes' understanding of how the nursing courses are written and the process from modules to placements."

Discussion

It is common practice to engage stakeholders in curriculum development (Keogh et al 2010, Virgolesi 2019; Maddock et al, 2019), and whilst it is well recognised that student nurses are important stakeholders in pre-registration curriculum design, there are few published works that focus solely on their involvement (Olthuis et al, 2022). Their experience provides insight *"as partners who have valuable expertise on their own needs"* (Keogh et al 2010: 38). The UK pre-registration nursing curriculum demands that the students pass both academic assessments and the proficiency-based assessment in practice (NMC 2018, Virgolesi et al 2020). Hence, student involvement can create a bridge between the academics and practice partners, who may have tended to focus on their own areas of assessment, and cause them to re-evaluate (Dalrymple et al., 2017; Nosek et al., 2017).

XXXXX is a widening participation organisation committed to providing inclusive education to students of all backgrounds, and first-generation degree students (Hamshire et al, 2018). Nursing has a reputation for assisting widening participation students to succeed (Dyson 2017; Young 2016) and the importance of respect, trust and a collaborative learning community in curriculum development highlighted by Lubica-Nawrocka (2018) may explain the feeling of 'safety' in the group. Achieving stakeholders' sustained partnership in curriculum development rests on a sense of ownership (Bellita et al (2020; Moulema, 2018) and collaboration (Olthuis et al, 2022).

The burden of students having to engage in studies alongside curriculum development meetings has been noted (Qazi et al, 2019) and could be a barrier to participation especially for those 3rd year students 'opting-in' to the extended placements under the emergency pandemic standards (NMC, 2020a). Conversely, 1st year students felt they lacked the necessary experience to contribute, as their placements were postponed due to the pandemic. A perceived lack of knowledge can be a barrier to student engagement in curriculum design (Tukhala et al, 2021), however, student engagement and empowerment can enhance first-year experiences and is a goal in itself (Bovill et al, 2011). Volunteers tend to be keen to 'give back' and to learn and develop new skills (NCVO, 2022) but high levels of

engagement can also be attributed to student feedback being actively used to shape the course (Rutherford, 2020). In addition, some students are career-oriented and ready to take part in activities which can benefit their career development (Qazi et al, 2019).

Another key theme to emerge was the student's personal and professional development as highlighted by other authors (Lubica-Nawrocka, 2018; Olthuis et al 2022). It might be assumed that student nurses would be well versed in the requirements of the NMC's standards for education, (2018) but assimilating this knowledge into the skill of curriculum design was unfamiliar and transformed their perspective of their own courses. The importance of being well prepared for meetings also been highlighted by Milles et al (2019).

Involving students in curriculum design can enable institutions to create consumer-friendly curriculum and programmes (Moulema, 2018) but students are not merely consumers (Carey, 2013); they enjoy being able to shape the future curriculum (Rutherford, 2020), help future students (Carey, 2013) and be involved in decision making (Little & Williams, 2010). The students felt honoured to be involved and valued having been able to contribute to and influence the programme development.

Conclusion

The involvement of student nurses in the development of nursing curricula was overwhelmingly positive, is crucial in providing insight into pedagogical and organisational issues and is an opportunity for them to gain academic knowledge and skills in communication and curriculum development. Their experience has emphasised the need to create inclusive mechanisms such as the use of lay language, flexible meeting teams and the sharing of papers well in advance. For the students involved, we are hoping that Ritzen's et al's statement will apply and they will get better results having been co-designers developing curriculum content with their tutors and trainers and been "taken seriously!" (2015: 1).

Conflicts of interest: none

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