The benefits of a fast-track, staff nurse development programme

**ABSTRACT**

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In line with other professions, nursing should offer a range of career paths to suit the differing needs of its members. There should be opportunities for nurses who have both the ability and the commitment to make rapid career progress. This article describes a fast-track, staff nurse D-E grade development programme for junior nurses. The programme has been introduced in an acute teaching trust with the aim of improving career opportunities and contributing to the delivery of quality care for patients.

**Background**

Senior nurse managers at Salford Royal Hospitals NHS Trust are aware that they must offer a range of career paths for nurses working in the trust. Opportunities should exist for nurses who have both the ability and the commitment to make rapid career progress. Although the introduction of a trust-wide preceptorship programme for newly qualified nurses was a step in the right direction, there is still a need to plan beyond this programme.

Nurse educators and managers have recognised the need for nurses to be offered further support with their personal and professional development post-preceptorship. This also reflects the current government initiative of lifelong learning (DoH, 2001; UKCC, 2001). The lifelong learning and personal development opportunities already available in the trust include:

- Personal development planning for all staff;
- Clinical skills training, for example a critical care course;
- Research/evidence-based practice awareness;
- Leadership and management training.

As part of a plan to invest further in staff after preceptorship, a working party comprising senior nurse managers and educationalists was set up to develop a fast-track, staff nurse, D-E grade development programme.

**The programme**

The development programme uses a competency-based approach where nurses document the achievement of set competencies. Computerised and paper versions of their personal profile can be accessed.

The competencies approach enables participants to quickly become effective in a range of clinical settings in the trust. Those who do well are ready to apply for an E-grade post within six months. The fast-track development programme demands high levels of ability and commitment. Participants need to take responsibility for their rapid learning and personal development, setting high standards for themselves and others to achieve. This competency-based approach also meets with Agenda for Change (DoH, 2002a), whereby nurses’ career progression is linked to the development of knowledge, clinical skills and role competence.

The programme aims to recruit the best nurses into the trust and maximise their contribution to the delivery of quality patient care as quickly as possible, while providing them with clear and rapid career progression. The perceived benefits of the programme to the individual and the trust are identified in Box 1.

**Criteria for joining the programme**

The programme is aimed at post-preceptorship nurses, newly appointed D-grade nurses and existing D-grade staff who can demonstrate professional excellence and leadership potential. To be eligible for the programme, practitioners must demonstrate the following:

- Up-to-date mandatory training record;
- Up-to-date personal development plan;
- Signed letter of support from ward manager/head nurse;
- Up-to-date clinical skills matrix;
- All relevant competencies achieved in clinical skills matrix. If not achieved, evidence of an action plan on how the competency will be achieved.

The clinical skills matrix is a competency-based programme developed by the trust for nurses to use during their rapid learning and personal development, setting high standards for themselves and others to achieve. This competency-based approach also meets with Agenda for Change (DoH, 2002a), whereby nurses’ career progression is linked to the development of knowledge, clinical skills and role competence.

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**Box 1. Perceived benefits of the programme to the individual and the trust**

- Helps practitioners assess their current standards of practice
- Develops analytical skills through reflection
- Enables practitioners to review and evaluate past experience and learning to help them plan for the future
- Provides effective and current information as evidence that they have met the competencies required for completion of the development programme
- Demonstrates learning, which will allow them to obtain credit towards further qualifications
- Promotes continued development of lifelong learning
- Improves retention rates of staff through investment in personal development
- Offers individual directorates the flexibility to prepare their staff for continued development and promotion
- Addresses recruitment and risk management issues
preceptorship. It identifies trust-wide and unit-specific competencies that, if achieved, assist the nurse in becoming a confident and efficient D-grade practitioner. Completion helps nurses to clarify their current knowledge of skills and procedures and rate their ability to perform them. Individual mentors use the matrix to identify nurses’ learning needs and to document skill performance. The competencies that are identified are prioritised so that the nurse is aware of which competencies should be achieved first.

**The programme**
The programme lasts for a minimum of six months. During this time practitioners are required to build a portfolio to demonstrate that they have achieved the following E-grade competencies:
- Accountability
- Clinical skills
- Research/evidence-based practice
- Teamwork and communication skills
- Personal and professional development
- Staff development
- Management and resource management
- Quality of care/clinical governance
- Management of change
- Innovation
- Health promotion

The competencies have been adapted and updated from the ENB for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting’s 10 Key Characteristics (ENB, 1994). To measure the level of achievement of clinical competencies, practitioners use generic D and E-grade job descriptions for guidance. Practitioners are also encouraged to use relevant information from their portfolio. Guidance notes are offered to expand on the ways in which practitioners can meet the identified competencies. Examples include direct observation by an assessor and reflective practice. Practitioners are also supported by a competent assessor in the workplace and by their local education lead or practice educator.

Teaching sessions are part of the programme and practitioners are expected to attend 80 per cent of these. Topic areas include clinical governance, management of change and clinical effectiveness. Practitioners also complete a criteria checklist, which provides evidence of continued professional development and successful completion of the programme (Box 2).

**BOX 2. OVERVIEW OF THE STAFF NURSE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**
- Six-month duration
- Demonstrate achievement of E-grade competencies
- Linked to trust’s job descriptions
- Portfolio of evidence
- Attendance at 80 per cent of teaching sessions
- Support from assessor in workplace
- Support from education lead/practice educator

**Evaluation of the programme to date**
The following evaluative strategy was undertaken to measure the effectiveness of the programme:
- Establishing the baseline situation prior to programme development
- Survey questionnaire to ward managers
- Survey questionnaire to E-grade staff nurses
- Participants’ evaluation of the programme
- Survey questionnaire to participants who have undertaken the programme

**Results**
The first programme commenced in February 2002 and 18 nurses were nominated to attend from the following clinical areas:
- Gastroenterology
- Renal
- Intestinal failure
- Orthopaedics
- Elderly care
- Women’s services
- General medicine
- Surgical high dependency

Of the 18 nominations 11 nurses chose to participate in the programme. To date eight nurses have successfully completed the programme and have been promoted to an E-grade staff nurse post or are awaiting interview. Three of the 11 nurses left the trust. The main findings from the survey questionnaires were summarised relating to the nurses’ and their managers’ views of the situation prior to programme development (Box 3), participants’ evaluation of the programme, and the usefulness of programme.

**Participants’ evaluation of the programme**
The participants’ evaluation of the programme included the following comments:
- ‘It enhances your knowledge and skills. It helps in developing and building your confidence’
- ‘I learned the significance of evidence-based practice. I am now starting to deal more in research and practising the ideal standard of care’
- ‘Discussing government policy – I now try to be more open to change and understand that the government changes policy and this is disseminated to the ward level where changes have to happen’

Negative comments included the following:
- ‘I found the programme to be an excellent idea although it was hard work at times. It was hard to fit the workload in with full-time hours and expect senior staff to assess when many already had one or two students to assess’
- ‘I had high expectations from the course, but it wasn’t made clear to me that you wouldn’t automatically get an E grade on completion’

**Usefulness of the programme**
The most useful aspects of the course were found to be: skills development; portfolio building; the essence of...
Discussion

This development programme aims to support individual nurses in developing into efficient, effective practitioners who are retained within the clinical workforce to provide consistently high quality health care services. Indeed, practitioners who took part in the programme reported an increase in skill development and felt more confident when utilising evidence to inform practice. Survey questionnaires administered to staff and practitioners also provided useful data in understanding perceived differences between D and E-grade staff and in the planning of the optimal time for nurses to start the development programme. A recommendation will be made to the trust for nurses to start the development programme at three months post-preceptorship.

Participants found it very useful to have their own personalised computer copy of the development programme. Further exploration of e-learning approaches, to assist in the delivery of the programme, is recommended and should include the use of: on-line discussion groups and a dedicated staff nurse development site, which can be reached through the trust’s website, to provide access to programme and associated documents.

It is intended that this initial project will provide the basis for the development of subsequent competency-based educational programmes at E/F-grade and nurse practitioner level to support and meet the changing needs of the health service (DoH, 2002b).

In the spirit of lifelong learning and to promote joint working arrangements with higher education, it is anticipated that the programme will form part of an accredited educational scheme with the local university. Findings from this study will ultimately inform future developments locally that aim to retain and develop existing staff. They will also provide evidence to inform national nursing policy.

Recommendations

The amount of study time offered to practitioners and the paperwork required for successful completion of the programme needs to be reviewed before starting the programme again with a new group of practitioners. Importantly, an organisational issue was highlighted during the programme evaluation in that there needs to be trust agreement on whether to guarantee an E-grade post after successful completion of the programme within the trust. This issue is currently being considered.

Conclusion

The intention of this programme is to create a structured approach to the development of E-grade nurses by focusing on a programme of study that equips the nurse with the full range of competencies required to function at this level. The knowledge, skills and attitudes developed as a result of the programme are transferable throughout the trust, thus meeting the programme’s key objective of retaining the best nurses, maximising their contribution to the delivery of quality patient care and providing them with a clear career pathway.