Evaluating the impact of scholarships

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- Evaluation of views of the scholarships

Nurses and midwives are required to engage with lifelong learning and keep their skills and knowledge up to date. This ensures clinical practice is evidence based, skilled, and led appropriately (Petaloti, 2009).

Scholarships enable professionals to undertake development directly to their role, and to lead and influence practice in their own setting. A number of organisations offer scholarships, including the Florence Nightingale Foundation.

The Florence Nightingale Foundation scholarships

The foundation provides several types of scholarship through charitable funding provided by sponsors. Travel and research scholarships are available to nurses and midwives, while leadership scholarships are also available to allied health professionals. Applicants must be registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Council or the Health and Care Professions Council, and work and be resident in the UK. Travel and research scholars should have at least one year’s post-registration experience.

Evaluation of the scholarships

In 2012-2013, two evaluations of the scholarships were conducted using anonymous online questionnaires:

- Evaluation 1 – Leadership awards in the past three years;
- Evaluation 2 - Travel and research awards in the past two years.

This article amalgamates the findings of the two questionnaires.

All 187 eligible scholars were invited via email to participate; 130 responded to the questionnaire (70% overall response rate), comprising 48 leadership, 48 travel, and 34 research scholars. Telephone interviews were also conducted with 42 leadership scholars and 24 organisational sponsors.

Overall, respondents found their scholarships enabled them to develop both personally and professionally and to develop networks with the potential for ongoing collaborations. They said the scholarships had a positive impact on patient care and safety, their own and their colleagues’ practice and the wider workplace. Organisational sponsors almost universally reported that scholars’ leadership skills had improved, and their learning had benefitted their sponsoring organisations.

Expectations and overall experiences

Respondents expected the scholarship would enable them to “give back” to practice and the profession by applying knowledge gained, developing networks, and

Key points

1. Healthcare practice and provision are rapidly evolving
2. Nurses and midwives need to undertake continuing professional development in order to maintain their competence
3. The Florence Nightingale Foundations offers scholarships to nurses, midwives and allied health professionals
4. The scholarships benefit scholars’ own professional practice and that of their colleagues
5. Sponsoring organisations say the scholarships benefit them and often have influence at national level
professional development. Leadership scholars referred to personal learning and growth that would help them become more effective leaders to improve patient care. They also expected to gain a wider perspective on leadership, quality improvement, and organisational transformation.

Most scholars (122; 94%) “strongly agreed” the scholarship met their expectations and the majority considered their experience “excellent” or “good” (126; 97%). In free text comments, a number said the scholarship exceeded their expectations: “I gained far more than I anticipated. To meet people and have time for discussion was wonderful. It was most useful to hear that even on the other side of the planet the problems were very similar.”

Impact on scholars’ careers
All respondents said the scholarship had a positive impact on their career and many commented about increased confidence, enhanced knowledge and skills and how their career had developed, for example: “I have had promotion which can, in some part, be attributed to the scholarship. I think that the scholarship helped me to see the things that I do well, and to value those things so that I had the confidence to apply for the promotion.”

A number of respondents said their career had already changed due to the scholarship and others said they expected or hoped for a career change resulting from the scholarship.

Some respondents detailed work they had been involved in following on from the scholarship, for example, setting up specialist interest groups. Several felt their profile had increased.

Many leadership scholars felt their scholarship helped them to gain senior positions, while others reported it had increased their professional influence.

Impact on leadership styles and behaviours
Only leadership scholars (and sponsors) were asked about the scholarship’s influence on leadership styles and behaviour. Both reported a profound effect; organisational sponsors were especially aware of this change in scholars; all except one considered the changes a direct result of the scholarship. Effects reported by sponsors included:

- Increased ability to challenge and to suggest and implement innovative solutions;
- Ability to manage and lead upwards;
- Willingness to delegate leadership responsibility and authority;
- Pronounced awareness of politics;
- Understanding and using organisational culture to bring about change;
- Improved influencing skills and presentation of self at meetings;
- Using evidence to measure improvement.

Both scholars and sponsors considered that increased self-confidence had led to scholars taking paths they would not have otherwise taken.

Impact on personal professional practice
There was general agreement the scholarships had improved scholars’ professional practice. Comments related to new understandings and perspectives, evidence-based practice and increased confidence, for example:

“The experiences during my travel scholarship, and learning about best practice from centres of excellence, has both informed me, and challenged me about my own professional practice.”

Most scholars also felt their scholarships had improved their colleagues’ practice, inspiring others to undertake scholarships and raised their team’s profile.

Examples of impact on practice included: improved safeguarding knowledge and communication with other professional agencies, greater recognition of early intervention to prevent mental health problem development, and collaboration with colleagues on dementia education.

Impact on patient, experience and safety
Most said their scholarship had improved patient care, safety and experience:

“My area of study involved considering the impact of specific mental health service on the lives of young people with autism and their families, as a result changes have been made in service provision for this group that I firmly believe have been supported by my research work.”

Leadership scholars often reported their work fed into trust-wide efforts or aligned with strategic objectives, and most saw at least an indirect effect from the scholarship. Examples identified by leadership scholars and their sponsors included: designing integrated pathways and governance frameworks, reduction of pressure ulcers by 25% in six months, development of key performance indicators on safety and experience in 35 acute wards, and introduction of care bundles.

Some scholars suggested they had regional and national impacts, for example by serving as national advisers and influencing commissioning.

Scholarship strengths and suggested improvements
Most rated the support from the foundation well. Potential improvements included: links to other scholars or mentors from a previous scholar, and wider marketing of scholarship opportunities. These suggestions are being implemented.

Most scholars would encourage colleagues to apply for scholarships. Box 1 provides an example of a scholar’s experience.

Summary
Evaluation of the scholarships illustrates their beneficial effects on scholars’ practice and patient care, on their sponsoring organisations and, in some instances, at national level. NT

For more information about scholarships go to: tinyurl.com/Nightingale-scholarships

Reference