Encouraging student feedback on placements

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After eliciting students’ views on what makes a good practice placement, one trust is now working to make sure students feel able to raise concerns

Educating and training are critical to securing the culture change necessary for the best patient care.

As such, Francis (2013) and the DH’s (2014) response urge clinical placement providers to stop taking on students or learners in areas that do not comply with fundamental patient safety and quality standards. Sir Bruce Keogh’s (2013) review into the quality of care and treatment provided by 14 trusts in England often refers to the value of learners, stating they are potentially “our most powerful agents for change”. It highlights that learners are capable of providing valuable insights, but too many are not being valued or listened to.

HESL is a local education and training board that ensures the provision of high-quality, future-focused workforce education and training. One element of its work to achieve its Workforce Skills and Development Strategy (HESL, 2013) has been to develop a set of standards to assure placement quality (HESL, 2014). This has been submitted as evidence to Health Education England’s Shape of Caring review (bit.ly/ShapeCaringEvidence) (Box 1). The clinical education team (CET) at Guy’s and St Thomas’ Foundation Trust (GSTFT) has participated in this work by hosting a teaching forum with a cohort of student nurses to discuss what they considered to be conducive to high-quality practice placements.

Preventing students

GSTFT encourages pre-registration student nurses to feel part of the organisation from day one, and so was keen to participate in HESL’s work. Students are treated as the future workforce with an expectation that they sign up to delivering the

Student nurse feedback can help ensure clinical placements meet students’ needs
trust’s values and pledges from their first patient contact. The aim is to ensure a strong “brand” of student nurses at GSTFT, and for all students to feel a sense of belonging to the trust and its ethos of patient care and experience.

The trust actively promotes openness and transparency. Students can express their views and concerns through various channels; these include a forum each term with the chance to feedback to the chief nurse about experiences across the trust. A weekly teaching session with an expert speaker is also an integral part of the student experience. This gives students regular opportunities to raise any issues with the education team or their link lecturers.

**Student feedback**

In July 2014’s forum, the 100 students answered questions about identifying high-quality practice placements (Box 2). Discussion was broad but a number of factors emerged about what they considered made a good placement experience (Box 3). They also identified that pre-placement preparation was key, which ensured the areas were expecting them and an appropriate induction pack was available. On starting, the most important thing was a friendly welcome from an inclusive, supportive team.

Mentorship emerged as a recurring theme. The quality of mentoring was a priority with some students, suggesting not all nurses were capable of it; students said it should not be an essential part of career or having difficult conversations. It is important that they also have a voice and are supported when there are challenges.

Providing learning opportunities for students requires a team approach, and GSTFT has developed a 2.5-day course spread over three months for nursing assistants so they can be more effective when supporting pre-registration student nurses. All staff at GSTFT are entitled to five days study leave per year; this means delegates can do the course in “work time”. The course gives an overview on learning styles, teaching techniques, assessment methods, constructive feedback and communication. This not only provides important learning but also values and acknowledges the input nursing assistants have in the training of pre-registration students.

**Making improvements**

The CET felt this was a useful exercise, which showed the students that GSTFT values their opinions and, with the regular student forums, offered a channel for them to express their views. It was important to the CET that, as well as the feedback strengthening the HESL standards work, any comments were acted on locally. Students’ comments did not identify specific placement areas but information was fed back to key mentors at the key mentor workshop in October 2014.

The themes highlighted by the students directly correlate to those identified by Emanuel and Pryce-Miller (2013) in their literature review, which concludes that supportive clinical teams are critical to student wellbeing. All students attending the forum agreed feedback on their clinical learning experience was vital and should be candid and given without fear of repercussions.

**Troubleshooting**

Students’ feedback about clinical areas being aware and prepared for their arrival is something the CET has tried to tackle by creating a “Help me on placement” email address. Students and mentors are encouraged to contact the CET using the email address if they are unsure of placement details. In place for a year, this has greatly reduced the number of students who arrive on a ward or unit that is unaware or unprepared for them. It is also another easily accessible channel for students to raise any concerns or give feedback.

Mentors can request support via the email channel for the tasks they have to do with students, such as writing action plans or having difficult conversations. It is important that they also have a voice and are supported when there are challenges.

**Fostering supportive teams**

Welcoming and supportive teams are fostered at the trust by nurses who take on the “key mentor” role. This is given to motivated, experienced staff, who are there to promote a high-quality learning experience and support the mentors in the area. The CET links closely with the key mentors and offers biannual forums to update them on current education initiatives and strategies.

Students mentioned the welcome they receive and the importance of everyone taking responsibility for it. Ward clerks are considered central to this as they may be students’ first point of contact. Before the email system was introduced, ward clerks were often unaware of when students were due to start placement. Informing them of upcoming student attendance, especially for first-year students, and helping them understand the important role they play in welcome and support has been facilitated successfully by the CET.
Protected time for mentors

The issue of mentors having protected time to sufficiently fulfil the role was raised by students. The HESL standards for placement quality assurance aim to develop a more fundamental culture of learning within all organisations (HESL, 2014). This should also:

» Place more value on the role of the mentor;
» Highlight it is an essential component of student learning;
» Acknowledge the time and ability required to undertake it effectively.

Local feedback has shown that these roles work best when there is protected time to undertake them. GSTFT is currently exploring ways to improve this in the placement areas.

GSTFT has found that gaining senior nurse support for the trust’s mentor, key mentor and sign-off mentor roles has been vital in raising the profile of all the work that is undertaken supplementary to the clinical care these staff deliver.

Confidence in raising concerns

The CET was keen to address the number of students who still lacked confidence to add their names to their comments. The reason for this might be that they felt it may in some way be detrimental to their placement experience. In 2013 the team attempted to address this anxiety by creating an algorithm on raising a matter of concern (Fig 1), which clearly identifies the process and the support that is offered to the students during any possible investigations. This information is disseminated to all students on their annual trust induction and is promoted again throughout the year at the weekly student teaching session, where a member of the CET or a link lecturer is available to discuss any concerns in confidence.

The algorithm has been successfully used to investigate all concerns since its implementation and has provided both staff and students with a consistent approach to raising a matter of concern.

Building a strong workforce

Working to develop an open and transparent culture at GSTFT reassures students that they will be listened to. This encourages them to stay with the trust after qualifying and will help to build a workforce that is accustomed to raising concerns.

The aim of producing a strong brand of student nurse during pre-registration training that, on qualification, is equipped and ready to work with their colleagues at GSTFT is reflected in the high numbers of students who chose to remain here. Retention figures demonstrate that 80% of our newly qualified staff have remained with the trust after a year of employment.

Safer staffing, patient acuity and the development of new services adds to the demand for high-quality nursing staff in the trust, and the recruitment of newly qualified staff who are familiar and confident with the organisation goes some way to address this. To be able to recruit this essential group to the workforce is fundamental, and retaining them is equally important.

Conclusion

It is widely recognised that there has been a culture in some areas of the NHS in which students feel they do not have a voice and will not be listened to if they raise concerns. It has, likewise, been identified that further national work must be undertaken to ensure students feel safe and confident to raise concerns. Our work has identified the importance of students feeling valued and having the ability to raise concerns within an open and transparent culture. Comments from it have been submitted to the Shape of Caring review.

Feeling valued and listened to have been recognised as important qualities that impact on students’ decisions when they are trying to decide whether to remain with an organisation upon qualification.

References


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