



Embedding Mental Wellbeing: Methods and Benefits Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021

A panel approach to reducing anxiety and improving confidence in undergraduate healthcare students embarking on clinical placement

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‘Question Time’ clinical placement panel

Introduction

The panel is led by Charlotte Rogers, Senior Lecturer in Healthcare Science (Audiology) in the Leicester School of Allied Health Science and Rachel Davies (Course Specific Initiatives Officer) at De Montfort University. Alumni, faith leaders, audiology leaders and clinicians make up our panel.

Audiology students commence long placements in clinical settings across England at Level 5; our panel helps to ease the fear, anxiety, issues of self-identity and low confidence levels that can occur when moving somewhere new and assimilating into a new team and workplace.

Rationale

Students and their families worry about the clinical placement - the professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirement of this Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and National School of Healthcare Science accredited course. The group is aware that placement opportunities are limited to specific locations, based on availability. Concerns expressed are usually not about the work itself, but the prospect of living away from local, familiar communities and leaving places with similar cultural values and norms to their own.

Many concerns and anxieties relate to practice of faith whilst on placement, and how this might be perceived by others. These worries sit alongside practical concerns of how to access places of worship and follow dietary laws. Other worries focus on how to make the most of the placement opportunity (many students receive employment offers postgraduation, whilst on placement, adding to perceptions of pressure to succeed). How to fit in with the team and whether to choose a placement with an independent provider or within the National Health Service is a concern too. The panel explore these issues openly and help to ease worries and relieve stress.

Method

The panel is recruited after consideration of the student group demographic. This session takes place for Level 5 students approximately three months before placement is scheduled in order to make it relevant and timely. It is facilitated by a non-academic staff member, to aid informality and encourage open and honest discussion.

Panel members:

- University Muslim Chaplain
- University Faith Advisor
- Alumni, with experience in both National Health Service (NHS) and private practice workplaces (as many as can attend)
- Clinical educators from practice
- Training leads in the sector
- University placement team representative

Inclusion of faith leaders allows us to make advice and guidance culturally relevant. The panel offers informal mentorship using the concept of near-peer relationships, and guidance aiming to enhance wellbeing and allay fears in an a culturally appropriate way.

Questions are submitted anonymously, nothing is off limits, and are then themed. Questions are put to the panel for a response from the most appropriate member, depending on the subject matter. Structuring the session in this format allows the group to express worries that often sit under the surface of interactions with academic staff. For example, a student who expresses fear about travel or location for cultural reasons can be reassured and offered advice, informal mentoring and support from others within their community. A student conflicted about placement setting can gain knowledge and support from those who have recent and relevant experience.

Before the session, placement can be a daunting prospect that looms in term 2 of the second year. The group can feel fearful and apprehensive, which can lead to different behaviours, such as drops in university attendance or feeling very upset about the need to move away from home. Placement Panel sees a shift and gear change. Enhancing the group's understanding, reducing anxiety and growing excitement for placement as an opportunity for a deeper learning experience, rather than something to be endured or strategically managed to pass the module.

Evaluation

In session we see connections and social bonds formed between alumni and students, providing powerful support for emotional and psychosocial transition from student to early professional. Key to our learning was how much the students value hearing the lived experience of our alumni, particularly in the area of race and racism. Embedding this kind of support within the timetable gives it legitimacy in the eyes of students. The group often chooses to share personal contact details too, continuing their support of each other and developing professional networks.

The following themes and ideas reoccur and are indicative of the value of the exercise in how it opens up dialogue and deals with challenging subject matter that often remains unsaid in other settings.

- Race, racism and responses to these experiences
- Practising a faith within a workplace
- Building relationships with other members of your team
- Living and building a social life in a new area
- Dealing confidently with patients
- Career options
- Balancing placement with university work
- Schedules, the working day
- Coping with financial concerns

Online polling software maintains anonymity while obtaining valuable questions. The first questions are set by the teaching team ascertaining overall group confidence using a Likert scale, moving to 'describe how you feel about placements' most often eliciting 'nervous' as a response. This leads us into more specific and direct questions from the group to the panel. One key benefit is that staff can also pose questions with anonymity to support or direct the exercise. Another is that the students can see how "normal" their concerns are as alumni further normalise the experience of feeling anxious before placement commences.

Post-session evaluation forms enable staff to reflect on the session and show key benefits. Groups report increased confidence levels, better knowledge of student welfare support at university and how being yourself with an open mind is key to a good placement experience.

Maintaining good relationships with externals and across university working is key to the success of this work. Alumni enjoy offering their stories, views and informal support. It is useful to be able to meet with them informally too after the session allowing for time to maintain our connections and swap stories.

Take-away message

A proactive approach that includes first-hand alumni lived experience and across university working enhances mental wellbeing for students who are embarking on work-based learning or longer clinical placement as part of a PSRB accredited programme of study.

This document was produced as part of the [Collaborative Enhancement Project - Embedding Mental Wellbeing](#).