

## **Student Placement Survival Pack Feedback**

### **University of Manchester Students' Union**

Work undertaken by researchers at the University of Manchester Students' Union, this project explored the ways in which first year nursing students used the Student Placement Survival Pack leading up to, and during, their first course placement. Research was conducted in focus group sessions segmented by student type including 18-24 year olds, Mature Students, and Student Parents to gain specific feedback.

The following report summarises the findings. Responses have been cleaned, removed of inaccuracies, and thematically coded.

A full thematic transcription of results is available on request.

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## **Summary of Recommendations**

- Improve the timing of dissemination by distributing Student Placement Survival Pack alongside the PAD document nearer to the time of placement
- Continue to update the blog and encourage further student submissions of placement experiences
- Do more to promote both the blog and Student Placement Survival Pack and stress their importance to new students
- Update travel and hours information, include information on the differences between placements, and advise on the expectations of students' professional development year by year
- Review and update current online placement information, and consider reinventing or collaborating with other course providers showing good practice
- Continue to distribute in both paper format and online, and add page numbers
- Include information specifically for Student Parent and Mature students, signposting to appropriate support services where possible

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## **Main Findings from the Focus Groups**

### **Receiving, retaining, and knowing about the survival pack**

*“I picked it up again just before I went onto placement”*

All but two of the students across all groups remembered receiving the survival pack, although some only remembered that they had received it at the start of the year nursing fair after being reminded by others in the group. Most of the students had retained their copy and knew where it was if they needed it, but some stated that they did not know where it was, and had probably become lost in the wealth of information that they received during their first few weeks on the course.

At the point of receiving the student survival pack, only one student could remember being explicitly told about the purpose of the booklet as she was handed it. Some of the 18-24 group of students had flipped through the booklet when they received it and noticed that there were maps that they recognised would become useful nearer to their placement. Only one member within the Student Parent group read the survival pack in full when at the start of the year when they received it.

### **Using the survival pack**

*“I flipped through it at the start of the year and remembered that I should look at it again nearer to placement. The mentor information and responsibilities was most relevant to me as I had travel sorted”*

Of the students who'd used the booklet, only a few of the students in the focus groups read the survival pack in full, cover to cover. However many used the pack for reference when they came across a term that they did not understand, such as 'PETHs' and 'PADs'. Many within the 18-24 group made use of the travel guides, although one did state that the travel information she required was out of date when she accessed it.

### **Using the online blog**

*“I saw an article posted to the student placement pack facebook and it was about a patient collapsing and that happened to me so I read about it”*

Most members of the 18-24 group were aware of the blog and had spent time reading through the articles on the blog. A few members of the other two groups, Student Parents and Mature Students, had accessed the blog. However, this was only because they had been referred to it by a peer who had posted a link to their own article on the student nurse Facebook group. Those that had been on the blog had appreciated the student entries that had reflected some of their own experiences in placement, and also offered advice on

situations that they hadn't yet experienced. Students who had not accessed the blog prior to the focus group expressed interest in the blog entries, and intended to look at the pieces after the session had ended.

### **What the survival pack missed**

#### **Timing and promotion**

*"I think they give out the booklet too early. .... I think they should be handed out towards the end of the first semester or with your PAD when you know where you're going"*

Many members of the focus group did not know about the survival guide or blog, and did not know what they offered. The Student Parents and Mature students groups in particular had low levels of awareness of the packs. While some were sure that they could find all of the survival pack information online through the nursing gateway on Blackboard, some would have felt more confident going into their placement knowing that there was a booklet or website that they could browse for support. Indeed, those that had received the pack and were knowledgeable of what the booklet covered said that many of the questions that were posted on their Facebook group were often covered in the survival guide. The one student in the Parent group who could not remember receiving the guide as she did not attend the nursing fair stated that she knew of others who couldn't attend and probably also did not receive the guide.

Students within all three of the groups stated that they were overwhelmed with information at the start of the year and at the nursing fair, and so many had forgotten about the guide until nearer the placement when others began to refer to it. Unprompted, all groups came up with the idea and agreed that the survival guide would be most useful if it was distributed at the same time as the PAD document. There was a common concern that the guide was given out too early in the year and that many students simply forgot about it.

#### **Travel and expenses**

*"People are most concerned about getting to placements, particularly people who don't drive"*

There were some concerns from the 18-24 group that some of the travel information was not up to date, and so one student found themselves at a train station that appeared to be out of service. There was further concern that while the booklet did actually offer some information on travel expenses, it was not sectioned out clearly in the guide and did not offer information on the distance that one had to be away from placement before being able to apply for expenses. Some students however were aware that they could access the information from the main helpdesk in the nursing building.

## Mentor issues

### *Contacting mentors*

Some students within the research, and their peers outside of the groups, had struggled to contact mentors. Students struggled to contact mentors before meeting them at their placement. Many students stated that they felt anxious when contacting their placement for the first time. They said that they didn't know what to say, and would have appreciated some bullet points of information to cover in the phone call.

### *Mentors having varied information*

The Mature Student group discussed ways that the advice given by the guide and their personal mentors differed. Some in the group reported that they had been asked to record their work in ways that they had not been taught, and they suspected that this was because their mentors often mentored students from other universities at the same time. One student stated "*I've heard of mentors who aren't fully aware of what the students should be expected to do – they need a booklet*".

## Expectations and responsibilities while on placement

### *Types of placements and what to expect*

During the session run for the Student Parent group in particular, there was a discussion of the 'fluidity' and 'differences' between and within placements. Students did not know what to expect when arriving at their placements and were unsure of the nature of the work that they would undertake. Students in the 18-24 group said that they would have appreciated having some information on the differences between placement types, such as the differences between a Community placement and a Ward placement.

### *The expectations, responsibilities, and development of skills year by year*

As well as the discussion on the different types of placements, students in all groups discussed the need to know the sorts of skills they should be gaining in each year. Students stated that it was unclear what actions and skills they were allowed to undertake, such as injections and compressions, and that this seemed to be completely dependent on a student's mentor. While students appreciated the mentor's role in their development, there were fears that less confident or less proactive students would be slower to have the opportunity to develop new skills, compared to the more proactive or assertive students that asked for training in certain areas. Students across the groups stated that it "*would be good to have some guidelines as to what you can do and are expected to do at certain point [...] for example, in your first placement you may be able to give an injection, but by your third...*".

### Spokes information

*“I think being guided on spokes would be good. You’ve only got a few days to do it and you don’t know what all the options are until you get there.”*

Students in the Mature group cited particular concerns about a lack of information on spokes. They discussed that leading up to placement they had to submit goals and objectives, but that this was difficult to do without knowledge of the types of spokes available on their placement. Most received information about the available spokes upon arrival at their placement, but others found accessing the information difficult. One student found the information on a student notice board that was hidden behind a filing cabinet in the office at their placement. Another student was able to find information about spokes at her placement by using the University of Salford<sup>1</sup>, but was disappointed that the University of Manchester was not able to offer the same easily accessible service.

### Hours

*“We received some information about hours on email but it’s really confusing. Sometimes they say we’re expected to do nights and then we’re not”*

The Mature and Student Parent groups stated that the information given about hours required on placement was confusing. While the booklet gave some information on what to do if students were ill and how to make up missed hours, students were confused about expectations regarding night shifts, and recent emails from nursing school staff had confused them further. While some of the Student Parents reported having supportive mentors who were accommodating with hours and regularly made effort to fit meetings around the students, all were aware of other students who had less accommodating mentors and had less childcare friendly hours.

### Getting the basics right

*“As long as I’ve got the basic information and know what I’m doing and where I’m going that that’s good”*

Students across the groups cited their own, or their peers’, issues regarding the need to ‘get the basics’ before going on placement. One student in the Student Parents group tried to contact their placement but the placement staff were not aware that they had a student starting there. Another Student Parent didn’t have a mentor to begin with, and many within the group cited that their peers had also had trouble when entering their placement. Students within the Mature group in particular said that they just needed to ‘get the basics’ before heading onto placement, and that many had come across broken URL links on their placement allocation page. A student within the Mature group said that when searching for further information on their placement, she’d actually come across a very useful webpage of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.salford.ac.uk/nmsw/courses/clinical-placements-database/placements-list-by-trust>

the same placement hosted by University of Salford<sup>2</sup>. The webpage listed all of the relevant contacts, the timeline regarding mentor allocation, the sorts of skills that could be acquired on the placement, the spokes availability, shift patterns, and the nursing model applied for the type of care.

### **Format of the survival pack**

*“We have a daunting course guide, but this is quite a nice size”*

Students across the groups liked the size of the booklet, the look, and general outline of the guide. Students across groups however did note that there was a lack of page numbers which sometimes made it hard to locate information quickly. Most of the 18-24 student group usually accessed the online version of the guide through the wordpress blog, while members of the Student Parents preferred the paper copy as it was always accessible without the need of logging into a computer.

### **Specific group feedback**

*“As a mature student you’re expected to be able to be thrown out into the big wide world and cope but the reality is that you have other responsibilities like childcare and caring for older relatives. We need more support”*

Both Mature and Student Parents raised issues about the lack of support they felt from the course and the placement guide with regards to the balance of shifts and caring responsibilities. Student Parents in particular said that while they try to be flexible, they often cannot be so when childcare is booked, or they have too little notice around summer holiday time placements. Students in both groups also stated that they felt that they either stuck out, or blended into the background, as a mature nursing student. One student stated that she found herself being “*almost apologetic*” for being a mature student when the placement had expected a younger student, and feeling like they expect the, “*to be the cleaner*”. Both Mature and Student Parent groups discussed lacking an identity and social circle amongst the younger nursing student population.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.salford.ac.uk/nmsw/courses/clinical-placements-database/placements-list-by-trust>

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## **Recommendations**

### **Distribution and timing**

All students across the three focus groups stated the guide was given out too early in the year. Receiving the guide during Welcome Week only added to the piles of information they received, and students noted feeling far too overwhelmed by introductory course information to even think about their placement. Some students in the focus groups said that they had lost their copy of the guide by the time they needed it, and some others could not ever remember receiving the guide due to the excitement of welcome week.

We therefore recommend that the guide should be distributed alongside the PAD document as this was the right time for students to begin preparing for placement.

Only one student across the three focus groups was explicitly advised of the nature and importance of the document when receiving the survival pack, and others suggested having a lecture ran by the writers of the guide to introduce and explain the purpose of it. Many across the groups did not know much about the placement guide or the associated blog, and used their student Facebook groups as their point of call when they had problems. Those who hadn't come across the blog in particular found the idea of reading about other students' experiences on a blog interesting, and were keen to visit the website.

We recommend that the promotion of both the guide and online blog should be something to focus and improve upon, alongside continuing to encourage regular blog submissions from students. As stated by one member of the Student Parent group, 'they've obviously put a lot of effort into this booklet... they just need to promote it more'.

### **Providing the right information**

While the information provided by the guide covered a lot of areas useful for students embarking on placement, there were some areas that could be improved, and added to the guide. In terms of improvement, students in the 18-24 group noted that some of the travel information was out of date, and we recommend that this may have been better placed on the website for an administrator to be able to easily update the information. Further, we recommend clarification of night hours, as recent explanations by the nursing school via the email system had not been clear for all students.

We would also recommend including a short list of bullet points detailing what to say to staff on the placement when ringing up to introduce themselves, as some students who were less confident on the phone approached this task with difficulty.

With regards to areas that were missing from the guide, students suggested a few ideas that have fed into our recommendations. Students across the groups wanted include

information on the differences between nursing placements, such as Community and Ward placements. Students also required guidance on the types of skills that they should be developing over the three years so that they could track their development against what was expected, along with what sorts of actions they could undertake (compressions, injections) and what sort of training they should have received before being able to perform these actions without assistance.

Finally, we recommend to look into gaps in knowledge of mentors. Students across groups reported their own and their peers' experiences where mentors had asked them to report in ways that students from other universities did, rather than reporting in the University of Manchester method.

### **Consider improving or developing supportive online platforms**

When accessing information on their placements, it was common knowledge across group members that the current online platform often provided incorrect or missing data. It wasn't uncommon for links to be broken due to them being outdated. While students in the focus groups were able to work around these issues, it created a bad impression for new students who were already nervous going into their first placement. One particular student used the internet to find more information on her ward and came across the University of Salford's nursing placement public database, where she was able to find all information on her placement, including available spokes, mentor and placement contacts, and the types of skills she would acquire. The website's information was particularly useful to the student in assisting her to fill in her preliminary goals and objectives as she knew what spokes would be available to her throughout the placement.

We recommend viewing through some of the examples on the University of Salford Nursing Placement website<sup>3</sup> with a view to create a similar website providing detailed placement and spokes information, or otherwise collaborate with the University of Salford and add to their current database.

### **Format of the guide**

Students were overall satisfied with the format of the guide, but recognised that there were benefits to having both a printed and online version of the booklet. One minor issue that students had with the format however was that the lack of page numbers as it meant that it could be difficult to access information quickly.

We therefore recommend continuing to distribute the guide in both printed and online formats, and to add page numbers to the booklet.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.salford.ac.uk/nmsw/courses/clinical-placements-database/placements-list-by-trust>

### **Specific group information**

The Mature and Student Parent groups felt that they had particular issues that the younger students in the 18-24 group did not, such as childcare and a lack of flexibility. Students in these two groups described that they often felt particularly distinct from the younger students due to their roles as carers and parents outside of being students, but lacked a strong sense of identity or community as they did not have the time to engage in the student community around other commitments. Some students struggled with having to be flexible with their course, or being asked to meet with mentors on weekends at short notice.

We recommend that to address these particular groups' concerns, the guide should have a section advising on how to best balance childcare and other responsibilities with the course, and signpost the groups to university services and other forms of support. Mentors should also be advised on specific issues affecting Student Parent and Mature groups, and offer practical solutions on how to best support Mature and Student Parent nursing students in their placements.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Sampling Frame

The groups sampled for the focus groups were as follows:

- Students aged 18 to 24 years old
- Mature students (aged 25+ and over)
- Student Parents (any age)

### Appendix B – Focus Group Topic Guide

#### Introduction

- Welcome, UMSU introduction and incentive offer
- Explanation of the research – to understand and evaluate the impact of the placement guide
- Data protection

#### Overview

- Do you recognise the leaflet? What can you tell me about it? Who produced it?

#### Distribution

- Did you receive it? When was this? Do you know where your copy is?

#### Use and content

- Do you use it?
  - How do you use it? (in their bag, with assignments, never?)
  - Ongoing use, or just as an introduction to the course/placement?
  - Has it been helpful?
    - Why/why not?
- What sort of things are covered in the leaflet?
- Now that you've been on placement, is there anything that you think the leaflet has missed or not covered well enough?
  - [probe for info regarding group strata ie is this useful for mature students?]
- Are you aware of the wordpress blog ?
  - Do you use it?
  - How do you use it?

- Why/Why not?

#### Content/style

- How would you describe the look of the leaflet?
- How does it compare to other materials you've received on the course?
- Illustrations?
- Formatting, font
- Size of the leaflet, length
- Does it flow well?
- Is it easy to find what you need? Contents, page numbers?

Any other comments?

End.