

A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR PHARMACY STUDENTS

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Pharmacy students often choose the sector of the profession in which they would like to spend their preregistration year without any experience of pharmacy practice. In this article, the authors describe a summer student scheme running in hospitals in the South East (South Coast) NHS region that is designed to introduce undergraduates to hospital work placements earlier in their degree course

In order to become a pharmacist, it is necessary to complete a four-year MPharm degree followed by a one-year competency-based preregistration programme. This year usually takes place in the hospital or community sector of pharmacy. Some students have little or no experience of pharmacy practice and therefore may apply to work in a sector to which they are not suited.

Although pharmacy degree courses are incorporating more work-based learning into their courses, many universities organise placements in the fourth year when decisions will already have been made by students about their choice of preregistration base and future career. The South East (South Coast) Education and Training summer student scheme is designed to introduce students at an earlier stage in their undergraduate life to hospital work placements with a strong emphasis on experiential learning.

Experiential learning in higher education may take the form of term time placements, paid or unpaid employment or work-based learning. Work-based learning embraces the principles of adult learning where the teacher is more facilitative than instructive, requiring the tutor to work with students in a partnership, setting goals and objectives.¹ Work-based learning allows adults to relate academic theory to practice; it should allow active involvement and make learning relevant. It also enables students to gain transferable skills such as team working, problem solving and communication, which are highly valued by employers.

When the views of employers and students are compared with regard to the desired objectives of work placements there are some distinct differences.² Employers tend to look upon the experience in general terms of putting theory into practice and exposure to the "world of work" but students see it as a much more personal development opportunity where interpersonal skills can be acquired in preparation for a future career. A successful work placement is one in which educational strategies are student centred, focusing on what a student wants to learn or develop. This should be determined through reflection in order to identify existing needs. The classical apprentice style of self-directed learning often persists in the workplace and the move away to look at students' needs coupled with their best learning styles and particular stage

of education and training requires a flexible approach to work placements from the employer.³

Students are reported to have valued work-based learning in a variety of business and health care settings,⁴⁻⁶ and similarly employers recognise the benefit of acquiring transferable skills.⁷ The training and education of teachers, nurses and doctors is grounded in learning in the work place.

Summer vacation placements in community pharmacy have shown that during work-based learning, pharmacy students are able to develop personal skills such as team working, communication, motivation, confidence, professionalism and decision making.⁸ The focus of the South East (South Coast) programme is to individualise training in order to develop these transferable skills as well as providing underpinning knowledge about hospital pharmacy practice. Community pharmacy work-based learning has demonstrated that undergraduates' knowledge can be significantly increased by the experience.⁹ The aim of the scheme is to incorporate all these elements in a hospital setting.

Traditionally hospital work experience schemes have been varied in terms of funding and experience on offer. Anything from a "spare pair of hands" to a mini preregistration training course, dependent on the individual hospital concerned, can be available. The South East (South Coast) programme attempts to standardise the approach to training across a group of participating hospital trusts and at the same time provide a focus for a student-centred, fully funded scheme.

DESIGN AND DELIVERY

The scheme originated in the former South Thames region in 1997 and was funded by the NHSE Regional Education and Training team. It was designed to offer students a four-week placement in local hospitals during which time they would be encouraged to undertake a preset list of core learning out-

comes. In the first year 50 per cent of students taking part in the scheme were retained in hospital preregistration posts commencing in 1998.

By 2000 the scheme had developed substantially in that it had become more student-centred and was organised by a pharmacist specifically employed to coordinate it.

Summer student scheme infrastructure and funding

The summer student scheme is currently funded by the Kent, Surrey and Sussex, and Hampshire and Isle of Wight NHS Workforce Development Confederations. Funding is available to reimburse students' salaries, employ a summer student scheme co-ordinator and provide an introductory study day for each student taking part in the scheme.

Hospitals apply to the South East (South Coast) Pharmacy Education and Training team to take part in the scheme. During 2000 funding was made available for 23 four-week placements and 10 six-week placements.

Recruitment to the programme The work experience programme is advertised to all schools of pharmacy using a poster and promotional leaflets in November of each year. It is also advertised on the regional education and training website (www.druginfozone.org/est/index.html). Students apply to the programme on a generic application form on which they may select up to four hospitals where they would like to be placed. The closing date for applications is in February of the following year. Completed applications are forwarded to individual hospitals and interviews are usually held in March or April. Hospitals inform the scheme co-ordinator of successful candidates. These candidates are then issued with regional learning resources and a programme for an introductory study day.

In 2000, 32 students were recruited to the scheme. The majority had recently completed the third year of their pharmacy degree course.

Aims and learning outcomes The information made available to students stated the aims of the programme to be as follows:

- 1 To provide undergraduates with an insight into hospital pharmacy practice

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- 1 To enable pharmacy students to make informed career decisions

Core learning outcomes were set regionally as a guide to tutors and students. These were particularly helpful if the student had no previous hospital experience. They were:

- 1 Describe the roles and responsibilities of pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and assistants
- 1 Describe the roles of other health care professionals employed within secondary care
- 1 Describe the functions of the departments within hospital pharmacy services in their placement trust
- 1 Give examples of career structures within hospital pharmacy
- 1 Examine educational opportunities available to hospital pharmacy staff

Core learning outcomes are supplemented by personal objectives that focus on the development of transferable skills within a practice setting. These are agreed with the tutor after discussing the student's learning needs and practical issues to optimise the placement. The programme is designed to take into account factors such as staff holidays and the resultant availability of supervisors in different sections of the hospital pharmacy department. Figure 1 outlines the use of documentation and assessment procedures that the students and tutor are recommended to follow. Regular student/tutor reviews are encouraged to ensure the student is getting the most out of this learning opportunity.

Teaching and learning strategies Students are introduced to the scheme through a regional study day either before or during the first week of their placement. The objectives of this day are to learn about self-directed study, reflective writing and the use of regional summer student portfolios, to gain knowledge about some of the core learning outcomes such as, career pathways, and to provide an opportunity for networking with other students.

Students are issued with a portfolio before their placement. This refers to a learning styles questionnaire¹⁰ which they can complete and discuss with their tutor before commencing their placement. The results of this and an informal interview regarding their motivators and past experiences should influence styles of teaching and learning employed. The portfolio contains guidance notes for the placement and record forms to document their learning experiences and opportunities. It also contains a tutor declaration form which is described below.

The choice of teaching and learning strategies at the base hospital is determined entirely by local employers and is dependent on the background, experience and learning styles of students, the number of students present in the department at one time and the availability and expertise of trust staff. All students spend time in the dispensary, clinical and medicines information departments. The amount of time spent in each

and activities undertaken are determined on an individual basis.

Assessment The assessment of work-based placements is considered best undertaken by a series of reviews throughout the period to provide useful feedback to the student. Assessment of performance against agreed objectives is probably the most consistent method particularly if it is competence based, with appropriate systems in place to provide feedback on performance. Log books are another tool and for short placements of a few weeks might adequately provide enough basis for assessment.⁴ Recent guidance from the Department of Health states that clinical placements should be assessed using a portfolio of practice experience which provides evidence of rational decision making and clinical judgement.¹¹

Student Students were requested to return their portfolios at the end of the placement with a tutor declaration of the student's performance in achieving their learning outcomes. Each portfolio was examined and information gathered on the type of activities undertaken and documentation used by the students. The tutors were relied upon to have assessed the students using evidence in the portfolios, direct observation, and feedback from various pharmacy supervisors and trainers in the trust. If the placement learning outcomes were met, the student received a certificate of achievement.

Scheme All students were sent a questionnaire included in their portfolios to evaluate the scheme. This questionnaire required them to rate their experience on a Likert scale in terms of its organisation, support from tutors, relevance and opportunity to complete learning outcomes and effect on their career choices. They were also asked to state how long they spent in each section of the pharmacy department and for their views on how the scheme could be improved. At the end of the scheme all tutors were interviewed and asked for their views on the quality and content of the programme, supporting material and level of regional

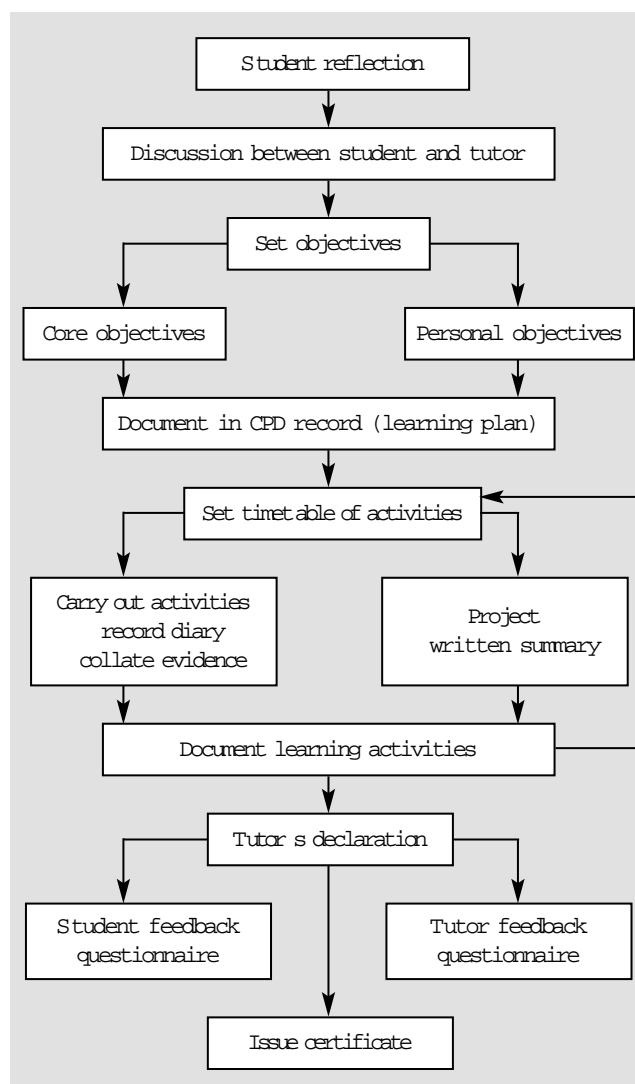


Figure 1: Documentation and assessment procedures

support. Interviews were usually by telephone unless otherwise agreed, and face to face in a minority of cases. The student questionnaires and tutor interviews were used to provide qualitative feedback on the scheme.

For each of the regional study days a feedback questionnaire was completed by the students to comment on the quality and content of the day. Informal comment and feedback were also volunteered.

OUTCOMES OF THE SCHEME

Of the 32 students taking part in 2000, 29 were considered eligible to receive certificates of achievement. Two students at one placement agreed that their work experience did not follow the regional programme sufficiently to merit participation in the scheme. The third student did not satisfy his tutor's assessment of his work despite efforts to support him during his placement.

Feedback was received from 18 (56 per cent) students using the questionnaire included in their folders and 16 tutors were interviewed either face to face, in a group or by telephone to gain feedback from all 14 trusts taking part in the scheme.

Twenty-nine students (91 per cent) attended an introductory study day. Eighty-

six per cent of students considered all of the study day objectives to be met. The content and quality of teaching was rated as good or excellent.

Students and tutors identified the completion of the portfolio as a key learning opportunity. The documentation was considered a difficult challenge by some, but the importance of reflective practice was appreciated particularly by tutors in view of its relevance to on going career development to preregistration and beyond. The core objectives were considered by tutors to be an excellent basis for organising a programme locally. Students felt well supported in their placements and enjoyed working in a team. A good balance of experience was achieved across all placements with clinical/ward pharmacy highlighted by students as the most enjoyable. Students highly valued any contact time with patients and asked for more opportunities to do this.

Students and tutors expressed a frustration in trying to meet the student's own personal learning outcomes. The practicalities of organising a work programme during a period of staff holidays did not allow enough flexibility in some placements. Also for this reason some planned visits to other hospital departments and work shadowing of other hospital personnel did not take place.

Upon completion of the scheme, six students indicated a changed preference for a career pathway in hospital pharmacy and 10 were already committed to hospital pharmacy.

Forty-four per cent of third year students taking part in the scheme were retained as preregistration trainees in the region.

DISCUSSION

The South East (South Coast) summer student scheme of hospital work experience for pharmacy students has been successful in promoting hospital pharmacy as a future career pathway for young pharmacists. Student feedback has been extremely positive and most suggestions have been incorporated into the revised format for 2001/2. Fifty-six per cent of students taking part in the scheme returned feedback questionnaires. The response rate might have been improved if reminder letters had been used or feedback forms could be returned electronically.

The retention rates in the South East (South Coast) NHS region from the programme are approximately 50 per cent. In most schools of pharmacy students are required to submit their application forms for hospital preregistration posts to their tutors by the end of their third year for the addition of academic references. Since the majority of students participating in the scheme do so between their third and fourth years, this means many of them have already applied for a range of preregistration posts before taking part in the scheme. Although participation in the scheme might not influence where students apply for a preregistration post, it can still influ-

ence which position they choose to accept. An alternative approach would be to employ more first and second year students in the scheme; however anecdotal feedback from students and employers shows that students prefer to gain community pharmacy experience in the earlier years of their degree. Furthermore, students at a later stage of their degree are able to take part in more clinical projects and make more of a contribution in a ward environment.

The base hospitals have reported a valuable learning experience in hosting summer students and have requested that the student spends more time on the placement. This feedback encouraged an additional five hospitals to take part in 2001.

The scheme has assisted in the planning and organisation of preregistration training. All preregistration trainees who have taken part are encouraged to use their portfolios as a means of identifying their training needs, providing evidence of past achievements and individualising their training programmes.

From 2001 the Royal Pharmaceutical Society has recommended that preregistration trainees should undertake cross sector work experience wherever possible. This has posed significant challenges to hospital pharmacy employers with many being asked to take up to a three-fold increase in community pharmacy trainees for placements of two to six weeks. Since the majority of hospital pharmacy employers do not have the capacity to take this additional number of trainees, many have responded by offering cross sector work experience to community pharmacy trainees on a one-for-one basis only, ie, one community preregistration trainee swaps with one hospital preregistration trainee. Within the South East (South Coast) NHS region, community preregistration trainees are selected for hospital

exchanges on the basis of previous experience and level of interest. Those who are unsuccessful in securing an exchange but have undertaken the summer student scheme should be encouraged to use their portfolios during their preregistration year to reflect on what they have previously learnt about hospital pharmacy practice and the skills that they developed. It is likely that we shall continue to use this approach until a solution can be found to the capacity and resourcing difficulties inherent in providing cross sector experience to all preregistration trainees.

The summer student scheme introduces the concept of continuing professional development and students use the same documentation in their summer scheme portfolios as that used in the South East (South Coast) NHS CPD portfolio adopted by hospital pharmacists and technicians in Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire. A key priority for the regional 2001-02 training programme is to facilitate CPD and encourage portfolio development among all pharmacy staff. By introducing the use of reflective practices and portfolio completion in the work place for undergraduates it is hoped that the experience will help pharmacists to undertake their own CPD with a clear vision of how to do it.

It is hoped that the scheme will evolve further in future to integrate with undergraduate training through joint working with local schools of pharmacy at the Universities of Brighton and Portsmouth.

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