



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title: Towards professional competence: supporting student placements in an undergraduate speech and language pathology programme at the University of Strathclyde.

Transition(s) the practice supports: Students are supported prior to, throughout and following a series of practice placements as they journey towards meeting threshold standards for proficiency in the profession of speech and language therapy.

Abstract: This case study describes the package of student support provided to students undertaking placements on the BSc HONS Speech and Language Pathology programme at the University of Strathclyde. It outlines the support provided before, during and after each period of placement experience. Taking a lifelong-learning perspective, the undergraduate phase is seen as the start of an onward journey of continuing personal and professional development. Connections are highlighted between each of the practice placements on the degree programme, with student-generated personal learning aims being a thread running through and between all placements and on into graduates' professional lives. Students are supported to take responsibility for their own learning as reflective practitioners.

Description:

Introduction

Undergraduate programmes in speech and language therapy must ensure that graduates meet defined threshold standards for proficiency, setting out what they “must know, understand and be able to do” (HCPC, 2014). Essential to this process is a programme of placements, facilitating the development over time of required professional competencies (as shown in the Table below).

Level	Placement	Number of half-day sessions	Semester
Year 1	4 days per week for 1 week	8	2
Year 2	2 days per week for 8 weeks	32	2
Year 3	2 days per week for 8 weeks	32	1
Year 4	2 days per week for 10 weeks	40	1
Year 4	5 days per week for 1 week	10	2

dysphagia placement			
	TOTAL	122	

At the University of Strathclyde, a comprehensive package of support is offered to all involved in this important endeavour; including practice educators (qualified speech and language therapists who supervise and support students on placement) and university tutors (qualified speech and language therapists offering university-based tutorial support). This case study focuses on the package of support provided to students. It describes how students are supported to transition into, through and beyond each individual placement. It also highlights the connections between the placements and on into graduates' professional lives. To this end, we first briefly explain how the overall process of supporting students' early professional development is conceptualised within a wider framework of lifelong learning.

In the Speech and Language Therapy Profession, strong emphasis is placed on self-directed learning and reflective practice, as a basis for continuing professional development and life-long learning. HEI providers have, therefore, been encouraged to view undergraduate students as taking the first steps on this onward journey (McAllister and Lincoln, 2004). At the University of Strathclyde, embracing this philosophy has shaped continual enhancements to the placement support package over the last decade, with active student learning facilitated through self-evaluation and action-planning tools, self-study tools, experience in completing personal and professional audits and portfolios of learning.

This innovation is in line with contemporaneous external drivers, including NHS Education for Scotland Quality Standards for Practice Placement (NES, 2008) and discipline-specific National Standards for Practice-Based Learning (RCSLT, 2006). It has also been shaped by QAA precepts for work-based and placement learning (QAA, 2007). This case study will therefore adopt the structure of precept 5: "Awarding institutions provide students with appropriate and timely information, support and guidance *prior to, throughout and following* their work-based and placement learning".

Support prior to placement

Information is provided in the form of a General Placement Handbook, as well as a specific Handbook for each placement. Briefing sessions prior to each placement orientate students to expectations and responsibilities of all parties, and highlight sources of support. In the latter stages of the programme, innovative combined 3rd and 4th year pre-placement workshops allow students with a greater degree of experience or mastery in a particular field of practice to share their learning with others.

Students complete a self-audit form for each placement, relating to expected quality standards. Students from second year onward are supported to write personal learning aims for each placement, and these are shared with the practice educator and the placement tutor prior to the beginning of the placement. These written aims help students identify what has already been achieved, and to identify future learning goals.

Students receive University-based teaching specifically tailored to promote the learning outcomes for each placement. Activities include practical tasks and workshops, role-play, engaging with NHS-provided online learning programmes, laboratory work on speech and voice analysis, problem solving activities, case presentation, discussion, video and other client data demonstration. This is delivered at the most relevant point, with the bulk of it prior to placement.

Support throughout placement

From their first placement experience onwards, students are expected to document regular self-evaluation and reflection on a bespoke tool relating to the placement learning outcomes expected at each stage of the course. We encourage the use of these records for discussion between the practice educator and the student on a regular basis.

Each student is allocated a university-based tutor for each placement. The role of the tutor is to support each student to make links and connections between university-based learning and experiences within the practice setting, and to facilitate student problem-solving in taking responsibility for their own learning. A schedule of individual and/or group tutorials throughout each placement supports this aim. Together with the student, tutors review students' placement documentation (personal learning aims, observation records, session plans, and self-evaluation forms) as well as mid-placement reports on student progress completed by the practice educator, where relevant. There is the opportunity for joint viewing of videos of the student carrying out clinical work and in-depth discussion. In the later stages of the programme students are assessed partly via an oral viva exam. Placement tutorials are designed to provide individual mock viva experience, and tutors offer written formative feedback on all aspects of student development, which is shared with both students and their practice educator(s). Students may review their personal learning aims as a result of tutorial support and personal reflection.

Placement is a time of intense personal and professional development for students and this can carry with it a significant amount of challenge (Healey and Spencer, 2008). This can exacerbate existing issues, or bring new challenges to the fore. Depending on the nature of the circumstances, the university-based team guides the student to appropriate university support services and/or provides a tailored package of additional tutorial support, either in the university setting or within the placement setting.

Support following placement

A programme of carefully tailored placement-related assessment and feedback encourages the student to draw together the learning from a particular placement experience into a meaningful, coherent whole. Assessment tasks facilitate active integration of theory and practice and promote deep reflection and action-planning. To support this, students receive detailed written feedback from both their practice educator and their university-based tutor for each placement.

In an innovative development at the University of Strathclyde, students' learning is assessed on 5 dimensions that are aligned to five competency areas used in the NHS for career evaluation and progression (the Knowledge and Skills Framework); thereby accentuating that the undergraduate phase is the simply the start of an onward journey of continuing professional development.

Completing each cycle of development, students are asked to monitor progress toward meeting their personal learning aims, and are asked to develop onward aims for the next placement. At an appropriate point before the next placement, designated time in class facilitates cohort-wide discussion, problem-solving and action planning. After each placement, each student is asked to complete an anonymous online evaluation of the placement experience, a process that promotes a different reflective perspective. Collated

evaluations are shared with placement providers; demonstrating to students that they are partners in the learning journey.

In Year 4, an innovative module 'Continuing Professional Development' assists students to integrate all of their personal and professional learning to date, and to document it in ways that will support not only their the applications for employment but also their approach to further development as newly-qualified practitioners with a commitment to lifelong learning.

Conclusion

This short account describes a lifelong-learning approach, as applied to the practice of supporting student placement transitions towards professional competence on an undergraduate programme in speech and language therapy.

References

Healey, J. and Spencer, M. (2008) *Surviving your placement in health and social care: A student Handbook*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Health and Care Professions Council (2014) *Standards of proficiency for speech and language therapists*. London: HCPC.

McAllister L. and Lincoln, M. (2004) *Clinical education in speech -language pathology*. London: Whurr.

RCSLT (2006) *Communicating Quality 3: RCSLT's guidance on best practice in service organisation and provision* London: RCSLT

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2007). *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 9: Work-based and placement learning* (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section9/placementlearning.pdf>)

Contact details:

Dr Susan McCool, Course Leader, BSc HONS Speech and Language Pathology
susan.mccool@strath.ac.uk

Dr Wendy Cohen, Placement Co-ordinator, BSc HONS Speech and Language Pathology
wendy.cohen@strath.ac.uk