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Tips for nursing students who are starting their studies

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Got to the start line – press 'go'!

Well, you've made it! You've started at university to begin your journey to becoming a registered nurse. Some of you might be coming straight from school or college, whilst others from different walks of life. Whatever route you've taken, it's likely to have taken a few years' of work to get to this point, to achieve the entry requirements and get through recruitment and selection. You might have had some doubts along the way about whether you'd make it but you have! And now you are here with your nursing degree programme stretching out ahead of you. It's quite some time since I was in your position but I can still vividly remember those first few weeks, when everything felt so new and unfamiliar and, if I'm honest, a little overwhelming. And yet, almost 40 years later, I still look back on my student days as being a formative and crucial foundation for my subsequent clinical and academic career.

So, as you start out on your university education, what are some of the key things for you to think about?

- From the outset, always act in a professional manner whether in the university or practice setting. Get familiar with the NMC Code of Professional Practice (<https://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/code/>) and commit to it from day one.
- Don't do things beyond your competency – never feel the pressure to do something in practice that you feel you're not competent to do. Ask someone to teach you so that you can always practise safely.
- Escalate bad practice if you see it – this is part of your responsibility under the Code. It's hard to do but talk to your mentor or lecturer and they will support you.
- Be proactive – take advantage of all that university life can offer you. You'll be working harder than other students on different courses but embrace every opportunity you can. You will get more out of your degree if you take the initiative and continuously seek out learning opportunities.
- Be the best you can be – always be inquisitive and always ask questions. Don't ever feel like you can't ask a question. Chances are there are others wanting to ask the same question.
- Don't ever forget the person behind the patient – there's always a person, a story, a history behind every patient you see. Seeing the person is at the heart of person-centred care so hold on to that at all times.
- Gather support around you – there will be times when the going gets tough and when you'll need the support of family, friends and fellow students. Start gathering that support network around you from the start, so that it's ready and waiting when you need it. Remember there are online resources too like The Student Nurse Project (<https://studentnurseproject.co.uk/>). So get involved.
- Your mentors are really important people – they are role models, they teach you, take you under their wing and will be integral to your learning in practice. You will come across some very good mentors and perhaps some less good, but you have a role to play in fostering this relationship. As a mentor it is much easier to work with a student

who is enthusiastic and inquisitive rather than one who seems disinterested. So be active and take the initiative.

- Be prepared for the 2nd year dip! – there is usually a low point in the middle of the programme where it feels like you've been doing the course for ages and there is still such a long way to go. Being aware that this can happen can help prepare you – it will pass!
- Don't regard the next three years as 'time to serve' but instead see it as a privilege, a special and precious time you'll never have again. And OK, you'll work very hard and there'll be times when you doubt you've done the right thing, but in time you'll look back on these three years (as I do) and realise that they are so very special. So, make the most of it!
- Leadership starts where you are – you don't have to wait until you're qualified to be a leader. Be a leader wherever you are. But take care that your enthusiasm isn't misinterpreted by those around you, who might feel threatened. So be sensitive and diplomatic.

You're experience as a student will not only get you to your destination of being a registered nurse but it will also teach you a lot about what it feels like to be a student. This will influence, in due course, how you'll support and mentor students. So don't ever forget what it feels like!