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Practice Tutors' views on their readiness for supporting pre-registration nursing students who require reasonable adjustments for clinical placement

**Abstract**

Background: In the United Kingdom, pre-registration nursing students (Trainee Nursing Associates and student nurses) include those with a disability or impairment who can require reasonable adjustments to maximise their achievement of practice based learning proficiencies. At The Open University, Practice Tutors support nursing students in clinical placement which includes overseeing the facilitation of any reasonable adjustments for practice based learning. It was proposed that Practice Tutors could feel unprepared in supporting these students similarly to other relevant stakeholders as reported in existing research.

Method: Utilising a qualitative approach with a broad interpretivist paradigm, data was collected from three focus groups involving ten nursing Practice Tutors. Audio data was transcribed and analysed using 'complete coding' followed by thematic analysis.

Findings: Three main themes were identified as 'it's complex', 'impact of engagement' and 'a cohesive approach' along with associated sub-themes.

Conclusion: Despite the obvious interest in helping their nursing students who require reasonable adjustments for practice based learning, Practice Tutors can be hindered by existing barriers emanating from a lack of both training and existing guidelines. The complexity of the Practice Tutor role and student issues can further compound this situation. To help improve these current difficulties, consistency in Practice Tutor training and induction is recommended as well as regular access to peer support. These recommendations could then assist with development of the Practice Tutors' relevant skills and knowledge.

### **Key words**

Nursing students, reasonable adjustments, Practice Tutors, preregistration education, practice based learning.

### **Main manuscript**

#### Background

In the United Kingdom (UK), pre-registration nursing students (Trainee Nursing Associates and student nurses) include those with a disability or impairment who can require reasonable adjustments to maximise their achievement of practice based learning proficiencies. Examples include hearing loops on telephones and

altered shift patterns (King 2019). This support must be available by law to these nursing students to maintain their quality of working life and to ensure equitable access to effective learning opportunities (HMSO 2010).

Provision of this support is coordinated by the students, clinical practice staff and university based staff. Successful facilitation of reasonable adjustments can be variable which can have a negative impact upon a student's practice learning experience (Foster, Ooms & Marks-Maran 2015; Craig, Wakefield & Prymachuk 2023). Students report that effective support from university and clinically based practitioners with facilitating reasonable adjustments in clinical placement can enhance their learning and help maintain their progression through a pre-registration nursing programme (King 2019).

King (2018, 2019) discovered that many practitioners who work with nursing students requiring reasonable adjustments for practice based learning can feel unprepared to support these students. This is mainly due to a lack of clarity of their roles, limited available national guidance and their own knowledge of types of disability and impairments. Literature that reports upon the experiences of facilitating reasonable adjustments for these students in clinical placement is very limited. This includes the viewpoint of all relevant practitioners involved with

this process potentially hindering the provision of this support which warrants further exploration (King 2022; Craig, Wakefield & Pryjmachuk 2023).

This study explored the viewpoint of nursing Practice Tutors at The Open University (OU) (see Table 1). Nurse Academic roles at the OU differ to those within traditional UK based 'brick' universities. Practice Tutors are unique to the OU and undertake the responsibility of an Academic Assessor (NMC 2018). This involves direct involvement of the confirmation of student nurses' course progression through liaising with both clinical and OU based staff. Practice Tutors also carry out a role comparable to that of a link lecturer present in many UK universities. It could therefore be suggested that reported challenges could be experienced by Practice Tutors when supporting nursing students who require reasonable adjustments for practice based learning which prompted this investigation.

Table 1- Overview of the role of OU nursing Practice Tutors

Practice Tutors are registered nurses (but not necessarily nurse Lecturers) who support OU student nurses, nurse Apprentices and trainee Nursing Associates in clinical practice
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Practice Tutors are based across the UK supporting nursing students in their local geographical region
Practice Tutors liaise directly and regularly with the Practice Assessors and Practice Supervisors associated with the students
Practice Tutors liaise directly and regularly with the employer of the students (students are only recruited to OU pre-registration nursing programmes directly through employers)
Practice Tutors do not necessarily teach the students for their theory modules unless they are also a Module Tutor at the OU
Practice Tutors are responsible for ensuring that a student's Practice Assessment Document is being completed, they attend relevant practice interviews and they also mark these documents too
Practice Tutors oversee the progress of any Action Plans in place for a student
Practice Tutors can instigate the completion of a disability assessment for a student to ascertain the need for any reasonable adjustments

#### Research aim

The main aim of this study was to elicit Practice Tutors' views on their readiness to support OU nursing students who require reasonable adjustments in clinical placement. The study aimed to verify if current available resources are sufficient in preparing Practice Tutors to effectively support these students. Additionally, the

study aimed to identify future relevant training and development required for OU nursing Practice Tutors.

### Research objectives

- To ascertain which resources assist Practice Tutors in supporting OU nursing students who require reasonable adjustments for clinical placement
- To explore if Practice Tutors from the OU currently feel prepared to support these students
- To clarify what training and development could be provided by the OU for Practice Tutors to enhance their readiness to support these students

### Method

The chosen methodological approach for this study followed a qualitative, broad interpretivist paradigm utilising focus groups as the data collection tool. This allowed for a deeper analysis of responses provided by study participants and reflected the explorative nature of this research. Ethical approval was sought as per OU processes with potential risks identified with plans for mitigation. Once ethical approval was gained, recruitment of the study participants commenced.

Purposive sampling was utilised by contacting all OU nursing Practice Tutors via email. A study participant information sheet was attached to the email and Practice Tutors were able to contact the researcher with any questions. A consent form was also created for completion by study participants.

Data was collected via three focus groups conducted through Microsoft Teams. A total of ten study participants attended the focus groups with differing levels of lengths of service in the Practice Tutor role and who work in various parts of the UK. A semi-structured question schedule was used for the focus groups to allow freedom of conversation. Predominately, the three project research objectives were asked with relevant expansion of answers prompted by the researcher leading the focus group. Reflexivity was acknowledged throughout the project enhanced by the fact that the researcher is not a Practice Tutor. Guidance for focus groups provided by Marková, *et al.* (2007) was adhered to ensure robust data collection.

Recorded audio material from the focus groups were transcribed using the available function on Microsoft Teams. All audio recordings and transcription data were kept on an OU password encrypted computer throughout the study and all personal study participant data were anonymised. The audio transcriptions were



checked for accuracy and then thematically analysed using a 'complete coding' technique following the guidelines of Braun & Clarke (2013). Themes and sub-themes were then identified ready for the writing up stage of the study.

## Findings

Three main themes were identified as 'it's complex', 'impact of engagement' and 'a cohesive approach'. In this Findings section, a summary of all main themes and associated sub-themes will be provided.

### **It's complex**

#### "What's my line?"

Study participants reported that in general, the Practice Tutor role is multifaceted so there can be a lack of clarity about the role within the OU, by employers and by Practice Tutors themselves. In turn, this can leave Practice Tutors unsure of the procedures of how to facilitate support for nursing students who require reasonable adjustments in for practice based learning clinical placement.

*"I've been flummoxed... you know the complexity really of the Practice Tutor role [in facilitating reasonable adjustments] and like there wasn't much guidance... I*

*didn't know if I was expected to just sort of be able to pick it up and run with it..."*

(Practice Tutor E)

### Students as a movable feast

Challenges of this process can then be compounded by student related factors.

These include students being unwilling to disclose needing reasonable

adjustments or a having 'late' diagnosis of a disability or impairment during the

pre-registration nursing programme. Reasonable adjustments can be can also

be changeable involving Practice Tutors accessing advice from Occupational

Health teams as to whether a student is well enough to be in clinical placement.

All these factors increase the complexity of supporting these nursing students.

*"And there's very changeable conditions such as mental health, where you have*

*students with anxiety, for example, or depression that can be really unwell at*

*times and other times be... really well"*

(Practice Tutor J)

### **Impact of engagement**

#### Empowered students

All the study participants agreed that effective engagement with relevant clinical

and OU staff assisted in their ability to support these nursing students in clinical

placement. 'Empowered' students were viewed as an invaluable source of support by having relevant knowledge of their condition and taking responsibility for their reasonable adjustments.

*"...if the student can access the right support, the different services available, it's up to them to a certain extent with the right support because ultimately [the responsibility] does lie [with them]; it's their learning..."* (Practice Tutor D)

#### It's a team effort

Next, Practice Tutors can find accessing advice from their OU team colleagues regarding the correct procedures for the facilitation of reasonable adjustments very useful. This includes their line managers and the OU student disability support services who provide general advice regarding reasonable adjustments and available funding.

*"...my first port of call would be to go to my [OU line manager]...a lot of them have been in the university quite a long time, so their knowledge is amazing"*

(Practice Tutor D)

### Employers as a resource

Finally, staff employed in the nursing students' place of usual work are described as being a useful resource for providing advice and background information.

Examples include line managers of nurse Apprentices and the local Occupational Health team. However, this resource is only helpful if the student has given permission for their condition to be shared with the Practice Tutors.

*"...because the role I'm in in practice education is still current, I would definitely go straight to practice [staff]"* (Practice Tutor G)

### **A cohesive approach**

#### 'One stop shop'

Despite reporting positive experiences of supporting students and being able to access advice, all the study participants agreed that OU procedures and guidance for supporting these students needed to be reviewed to ensure consistency. Current available OU resources are described as satisfactory but the development of a new webpage, specifically for Practice Tutors which includes all the relevant information about their role in one place, is viewed as a highly beneficial idea.

*"...there are plans to have a Practice Tutor [webpage] and there would be a one stop shop where we could find out information about lots of things... this would be an ideal area to find out information for reasonable adjustments..."*

(Practice Tutor H)

### Streamlined training

Streamlining Practice Tutor training is suggested as potentially being helpful as currently there are regional differences across the OU teams. Study participants suggested that this training should include how to support the nursing students requiring reasonable adjustments in clinical placement; especially instruction on how to have conversations about this learning support with students and their employers.

*"...a rolling programme throughout the year [would] be very helpful... so I'd like to see something more formal"*

(Practice Tutor A)

### Consistent peer support

Peer support from other Practice Tutors, sharing experiences and knowledge of supporting these students, is viewed as invaluable. Again, the study respondents suggested that this should be made more consistent with perhaps allocated

mentors and the creation of a formal related Community of Practice for OU nursing Practice Tutors.

*“It would be far better if people who are experienced Practice Tutors were actually doing [the training] because then [they] could use anecdotes, you could discuss things in a much more realistic way”* (Practice Tutor C)

## Discussion

Practice Tutors are clearly motivated to support any nursing student who require reasonable adjustments for clinical placement, but the lack of clarity around their role can cause confusion and hinder the success of the facilitation of this support. This echoes previous research/literature available whereby the associated stakeholders have reported not knowing exactly what they can or should be doing, who to contact or how to access relevant resources (King 2018; 2019). This aspect is potentially compounded by student related issues, such as non-disclosure, which further complicates the provision of reasonable adjustments. Echoing the findings by King (2022), the study participants suggest that the OU needs to produce clearer guidance on the Practice Tutor role to OU staff, students and employers in general and specifically to the facilitation of reasonable adjustments.

To assist in overcoming this lack of clarity, Practice Tutors have identified useful resources that can be accessed to acquire information and knowledge; this is predominately the nursing students, OU colleagues and practice based staff. However, these experiences can vary in their effectiveness. For example, if a nursing student has not disclosed to their employer that they require reasonable adjustments, then Practice Tutors cannot access the workplace colleagues for advice (a disability or impairment is a private diagnosis and can only be shared with a student's permission). Therefore it is suggested that on induction to the pre-registration nursing programme, students should be encouraged to disclose any diagnosis to their Practice Tutor and be made aware of the benefits of this for receiving all the support they require for their learning.

A clear recommendation from Practice Tutors is for the OU to streamline training on how to support nursing students who require reasonable adjustments for clinical placement. Current variations or absence of these events is causing gaps in Practice Tutors' knowledge and decreased confidence in instigating conversations with students and the students' employers. The proposed webpage, exclusively for Practice Tutors, is viewed as a step in the right direction where a section on this topic can be included. Additionally consistent peer support is reported as essential due to the uniqueness and complexity of the Practice Tutor role. Recommendations for tapping into this this invaluable staff

resource include mentorship and regular Practice Tutor forums to allow space to share authentic nursing student scenarios; all these recommendations would also aid the Practice Tutors' professional development.

### Limitations

This study has been insightful and will assist in planning local professional development for the OU nursing Practice Tutors. Additionally, the research will add to the existing international body of evidence available regarding the topic of supporting nursing students in clinical placement who require reasonable adjustments. However, it has to be acknowledged that this is a small scale study with potential nuances relatable to the OU only, both of which could affect the generalisability of the findings.

### Conclusion

Although the Practice Tutor role is unique to the OU, comparisons can be drawn from existing literature in terms of some relevant stakeholders needing clarity on the processes involved with facilitating reasonable adjustments for nursing students for practice based learning in clinical placement (King 2018, 2019, 2022). Consistency in training, regular peer discussions and easier access to OU resources could help widen Practice Tutors' knowledge and also increase their



ability in providing this support to the nursing students and their employers.

Despite the obvious interest in helping their students, Practice Tutors are currently hindered by existing barriers which requires the development of effective resources being available to this essential group of student facing practitioners.

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## **Key Points**

- The nursing Practice Tutor role is multifaceted and requires clarification on how these practitioners support nursing students who require reasonable adjustments in clinical placement
- Despite the obvious interest in helping their nursing students who require reasonable adjustments for clinical placement, Practice Tutors can be hindered by existing barriers
- Current Practice Tutor professional development requires streamlining to ensure consistency in training for the facilitation of reasonable adjustments for practice based learning

## **CPD questions**

1. What are the advantages of nurses understanding the roles of university-based staff when supporting nursing student who requires reasonable adjustments?
2. As a practice assessor or practice supervisor, how can you help facilitate reasonable adjustments for nursing students' practice learning?

3. Visit the Reasonable Adjustments In Nursing Education website

[www.raine.org.uk](http://www.raine.org.uk) and identify three useful resources and think about how you will use these in your future practice.