

Supporting the library and information needs of health and social care students on placement.

Abstract

Objective

The aim of this research was to explore the library and information needs of Health and Social Care students while on placement.

Methods

Both desk and primary research were conducted and included an online questionnaire to students and semi-structured interviews.

Results

The questionnaire was completed by 252 students from a variety of programmes, equivalent to a 10% response rate. The results indicate a wide range of factors impacting on the library and information experiences of students. Whilst differences in the availability of a physical library in hospital or community locations still exist, these are mitigated by technology and a preference for home study. A significant result is that 77% (n=193) of students on placement study at home, using a variety of Internet-connected devices. This highlights a marked change in practice and underlines the need for mobile compliant e-resources and accessible at-a-distance services.

Conclusion

As a result of this research, practical recommendations on how library support can be improved were developed including, enhanced collaboration and learning with NHS colleagues, and knowledge sharing with other departments within the University who support our students.

Introduction

Clinical placements account for up to 50% of course time for some health and social care (HSC) students¹ and are increasingly taking place in diverse and non-traditional locations, often at a considerable distance from existing NHS or University library sites. During 2013/14, more than 150 different locations hosted UWE HSC students' placements. These ranged from large acute hospitals, through community

bases to small independent and voluntary sector (IVS) locations. With a significant period of the course delivery away from the host university, a fresh approach to satisfying the information needs of students on placement must be considered. The revolution ² in the means of access to, and availability of electronic resources and support services, also impacts on the usage of a physical library while on placement.

Literature review

The health and social care policies of successive governments have led to a greater integration of services, from the NHS Plan ³ in 2000 to the present day ⁴ and an increasing emphasis on care being delivered in the community and voluntary sectors. This development has led to a corresponding widening of the placement locations available to HSC students. At the same time, the UWE curriculum has shifted the emphasis of academic study for students whilst on placement from theory towards the essentially practice-based.

The specific nature of being on placement in the community setting may cause different issues and stresses to that of a hospital placement. Gidman ⁵ explores this, and a summary by Lloyd ⁶ suggests two factors impacting on the placement experience:

- The potential isolation of the roles and the possibility of lone working can make it more stressful and can make the students/mentor relationship more difficult to maintain
- There is a possible lack of time and opportunity to access information resources for their practice (compared to nurses in the acute hospital sector) – although students' lack of time for study while on placement is not an issue exclusive to students on a community placement

Issues pertaining specifically to students on community placements were explored by Baglin and Rugg ⁷ who stated that

The need for increased community nursing capacity must be balanced with adequate support for student nurses' learning needs during community-based placements(p144)

In terms of access to resources and information technology (IT) in these frequently more isolated locations, there are two distinct chronological phases in the literature: literature up to 2008 (summarised in Lloyd ⁶) notes a number of historical surveys ^{7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16} which appear to form a consensus that students on community and IVS placements can encounter additional difficulties accessing physical library resources and IT provision due to the potential remoteness from a university or NHS library base. A second tranche of more recent research ^{6, 17} suggests this lack of access to resources has reduced. This may reflect the way that Internet access and the exponential growth in various forms of mobile technology have lessened the isolation and the pre-existing barriers to accessing information resources. It is significant that in Great Britain 22 million households (84%) had Internet access in 2014, up from 57% in 2006. ¹⁸ Internet access is not only from home desktop computers and laptops, but also via mobile phones and other devices: 64% of adults in the UK accessed the Internet via a smartphone in the three month period July – September 2015¹⁹

Research Project

In the light of this changing landscape of an increase in the range of placement locations available, combined with a growing reliance on IT, UWE undertook to review its library support for students on placement. The research project ²⁰ was carried out at the Glenside Campus Library, the main HSC library of the University.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the research was to gather intelligence to improve services for HSC students on placement. Three objectives were developed, to investigate:

1. What are the experiences of health and social care students on placement relating to library and information resource support?
2. Does experience vary based on type of placement?
3. In what ways could library and information resource support be developed and improved?

Methods

The research was carried out by two librarians in the Faculty. An academic in the Faculty with an extensive research profile was used as a critical friend and made comments on the draft report. Input from the Professional Placement Office (PPO), the area of the organisation which allocates and manages placements for students,

was vital to understanding the placement experience. A mixed methods approach was agreed by the research team as the most appropriate way to gain rich information to address the research questions.

Phase 1

The initial research method chosen **was an online questionnaire for students.**

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. Second and third year students were targeted as a purposive sample. This was, as noted by Mailer ¹², because of their previous experience of placements and exposure to both NHS and HE libraries. In order to extend the literature base already in existence on this topic (⁵⁻¹⁷), students from the three departments representing health and social care: Nursing and Midwifery, Allied Health and Health and Applied Social Sciences were approached, which offered a wide-based research sample.

The researchers constructed a questionnaire for students in a format used both at UWE and by previous studies ^{6,15} in this field and thus facilitated both an element of confidence in it as a tested method ²⁰ as well as the opportunity for comparison and contrast with these earlier studies. A mix of open and closed questions was used and members of UWE Library staff piloted the questionnaire to check for clarity.

The questions sought to elicit information and views on the use made of libraries by students on placement, **their access to library resources, both physical and electronic**, as well as to increase our understanding of the other sources of support students use whilst on placement. **For further clarification of the nature of the questions asked, the full questionnaire is included as additional Supplementary Material.** The questionnaire focussed on:

- Scene setting – programme studying, year of course, location at time of last placement
- Frequency of use of libraries
- Importance of and reasons for use of libraries
- Access to facilities and resources
- Importance of access
- Place of study
- Devices accessed at home
- Support for and during placement

The final questions invited qualitative comments for improving the placement experience

Phase 2

Semi-structured interviews

Additional methods of data collection were considered important in meeting the research aims and objectives as well as providing a “methodological triangulation”²¹(p346), to allow for corroboration or questioning of findings, and to explore the topic in more detail. This phase of the research resulted in the collection of additional rich data through a number of semi-structured interviews. In the first, an Academic in Practice (AiP) (a member of academic staff who works with mentors and students in the clinical setting) was identified. The AiP was invited to make suggestions as to how we might improve our visibility with students. A semi-structured interview was developed with the questions sent to the interviewee in advance. This provided a structure to the interview, but also allowed for flexibility, responsive to the interviewee.

A second AiP asked students for comments on their use of libraries whilst on placement in one of their regular Supervision of Learning (SOL) days. SOL days form an important link between theory and practice; groups of students come into the University regularly during their placements to discuss their experiences, facilitated by a member of academic staff.

In addition, the researchers carried out interviews with key members of HSC library staff and with four local NHS library colleagues. NHS librarians were asked to describe the type and frequency of questions from UWE students and to detail the support they provided in meeting those enquiries received during the practice placements. As with the AiP, these colleagues were invited to make suggestions on improving the existing provision.

Results

The data was analysed using SurveyMonkey© together with manual interpretation and further analysis of the raw data. A number of key themes are reported here.

Completed questionnaires were returned electronically by 252 students, which represented 10% of students in years two and three of a range of health and social care related programmes (table 1).

Fifty-one percent (n=129) of surveys were returned by year two students and 49% (n=123) by HSC students in year three of study. Not all questions were answered by all students.

Programme	No. of respondents
Adult nursing	102
Mental health nursing	26
Children's nursing	24
Midwifery	15
Occupational therapy	14
Social work	13
Specialist community public health nursing (SCPHN)	13
Radiotherapy	8
Learning disabilities nursing	7
Physiotherapy	4
Diagnostic imaging	3
Sports therapy and rehabilitation	1
Other	1
TOTAL	252

Table 1 Programmes represented by respondents in the questionnaire

Placement locations

Following the first two questions asking students to identify their programme and year of study, the questionnaire moved on to look at the student's last placement. Responses were received from 141 placement settings, scattered throughout the South West of England and as far away from the University as 282 kilometres. The sense of distance from the base university library was touched on by some respondents:

Too far to drive to actually come to library

Living and being on placement so far away, returning resources within the time restrictions is not always easy

Frequency of use of libraries

The next question asked respondents how frequently (a few times a week, monthly, occasionally, never) they used a number of libraries. These were categorised into University, NHS or Other (e.g. public).

The results indicated that 8.6% (n=21) used a university library 'a few times a week' and 25% (n=62) never. For NHS libraries, 3.9% (n=3) used these services 'a few times a week', and 72.4% (n=155) not at all. The results in the 'Other' category were 1.4% (n=3) for 'a few times a week' and 72.4% (n=155) never. The results were broadly consistent regardless of location. These and subsequent results will be discussed in the next section.

When students made use of NHS libraries they were extremely pleased with the service

RUH NHS Library is really good and the staff are really knowledgeable

The apparent low use of NHS libraries was reinforced by the qualitative responses received from NHS library colleagues. To the question "How many queries a week do you get from UWE students", the replies were

We don't record this information but would estimate it to be around 5-10 a week

Very few

It was however acknowledged that it could be difficult to identify visitors as students unless they were in uniform or identified themselves.

When asked "Please estimate how much time (hours/mins) that you spend on dealing with queries from UWE students per week", the NHS library responses were:

Most enquiries are answered within a couple of minutes but if we help someone with a literature search/critical appraisal then we may spend up to an hour with them

Less than 30 minutes

1.5 hours

A student commented that

No facility near my placement...only access to UWE library during days at UWE (once a fortnight)

There were also a significant number of students who stated that they simply did not have time to use the library whilst on placement:

I have never had the chance to use the library during placement time, neither at UWE or an NHS library. The time is not given to go off and do this

I don't feel there is a need to access library during placement as we are all far too busy and e-books are more convenient

NHS Librarians were asked if more training in UWE resources would be useful in helping students, particularly for the minority of students identified as needing a larger amount of time and support. One NHS librarian commented

...it would help if Trust Library staff [could] access the site so that if the students need help, we would be more familiar with the content

Yes, we would like to shadow a UWE librarian for a day (for example)

and in response to “Any other comments?” one NHS librarian noted

The more UWE librarians and NHS librarians know about each other's resources the better it will be for the students

Importance of and reasons for use of libraries

To the question “How important was it for you to access library resources on placement”, the responses (important, useful but not essential, unimportant) indicate that 50% reported access is ‘important’ whilst 43% said it was ‘useful but not essential’.

The respondents were asked “what was the main reason for using library resources?”

The research shows that 47% (n=120) mainly used library resources on placement to assist with completing an academic assignment, and 33% (n=83) to support their clinical work. A significant percentage (17% n=42) also said they used library resources for general studying purposes with 3% (n=7) for professional updating. The students canvassed during their SOL day gave an interesting insight

There are no assignments set, so no need to read

Although re-sits of unsuccessful assignments may well fall within a placement period.

Access to facilities and resources

Respondents were asked which of the following were available at their last placement: library/resource centre, study space, and computer with internet access. For library/resource centre availability, there was a marked difference between the two placement locations, with 32% (n=38) of students on a community placement reporting that one was available, and 76% (n=108) confirming library availability on a hospital placement.

The vast majority of students 79% (n=198) report that they have access to a computer with internet access, regardless of location.

However, some students reported a frustration with access to computers both in the clinical setting and in the library

Have to ask the registered nurse for a password to get onto the internet at work

Problems logging on at start

Frustrating not being able to access internet...because don't have a... log-in

There was also evidence that some students didn't know about the facilities available

I live in Exeter so it would be good to know how to access local NHS libraries when on days off

Importance of access

Of the three resources listed, an overwhelming 94.4% (n=238) stated that use of a computer was most important

I feel there should be a dedicated computer(s) resource area for students to have access to whilst on placement 24.7

In addition, from the student interview and through comments gathered via the SOL day, a strong theme was that students appreciate Internet access on placement for a range of reasons that are related to both academic and also personal or leisure use.

A lack of internet access (from anywhere within the placement location) was heartfelt

Appalling!!! Utter disaster as there was no internet which made the whole process of logs...a nightmare...

However, students who had been provided with a laptop and dongle for their placement commented

The use of the university laptop and the dongle have been invaluable resources to my studies

Place of study

Respondents were asked where they conducted most of their studying. The options were at a UWE Library, an NHS Library, other library, or at home.

Over three-quarters of students did most of their studying from home (Figure 1) with this figure consistent across both hospital and community placement locations.

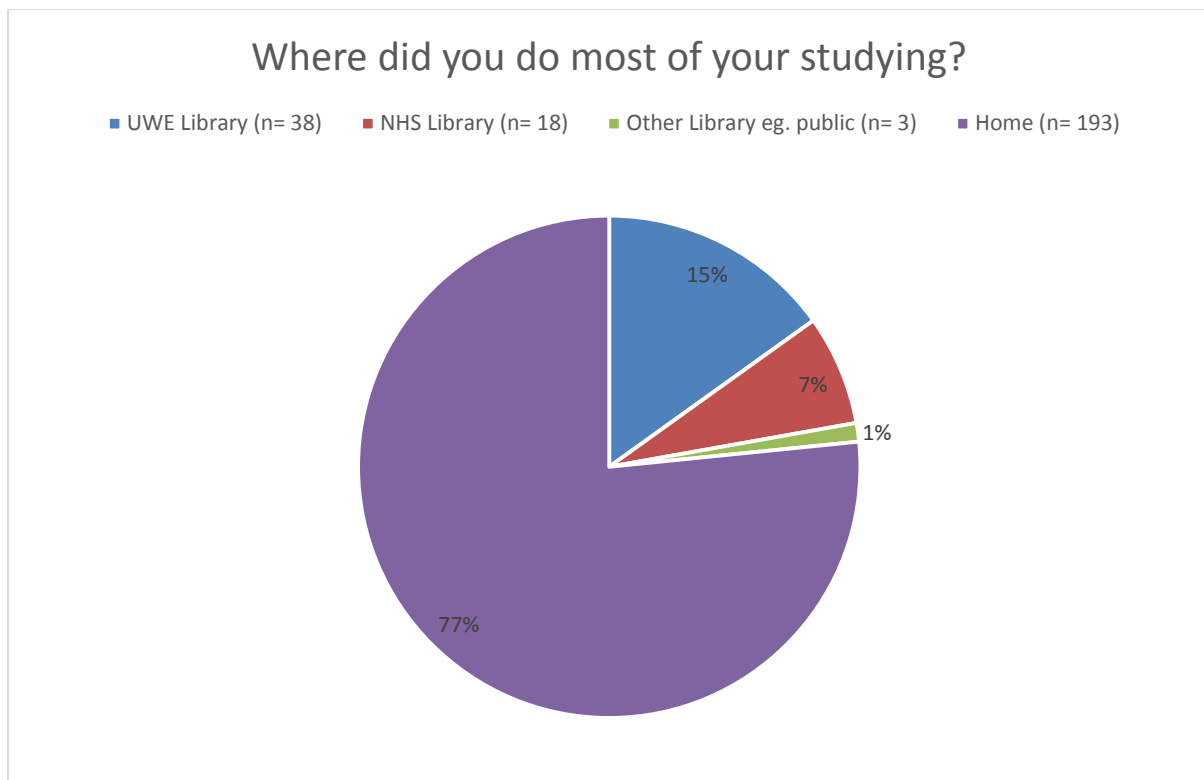


Figure 1 Where respondents on both hospital and community placements do most of their studying

There were a number of comments made about the reasons for this including

When you are working fulltime hours on a busy ward I don't understand how you are supposed to have time to access library resources except in your free time at home

There was also an acknowledgement of the convenience of electronic resources

Library online resources are very useful meaning work can be completed at home

I rarely visit the library when on placement due to time constraints but find that I can access what I need at home

To gain more detail on the range of resources and where they were accessed, respondents were also asked where of the three choices – home, UWE, NHS, they had accessed a range of resources: printing, e-books, journals, databases, websites. The responses confirm the use of home as the preferred base for studying, as, for instance, 71% (n=161) accessed e-books from home, 68% (n=146) databases from home and 85% (n=199) websites from home. The second-highest favoured location was UWE, followed by NHS libraries. The use of UWE may be explained by students attending UWE on SOL days once a fortnight during clinical placements.

Glenside has the most fantastic resources and I really appreciate being able to access e-books and journals from home

Very good to be able to access everything online from everywhere

I now manage to access e-books/journals from home without too much trouble

It is easy to get access to library resources via the Internet away from UWE, so looking up journals and books was really easy

Devices accessed at home

Given the explosion in Internet access ² the researchers were keen to discover the extent of ownership of a range of devices from home. The question asked whether students had access to a home computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone. 94% (n=238) had access to a laptop at home, and 61% (n=154) to a smartphone (Figure 1)

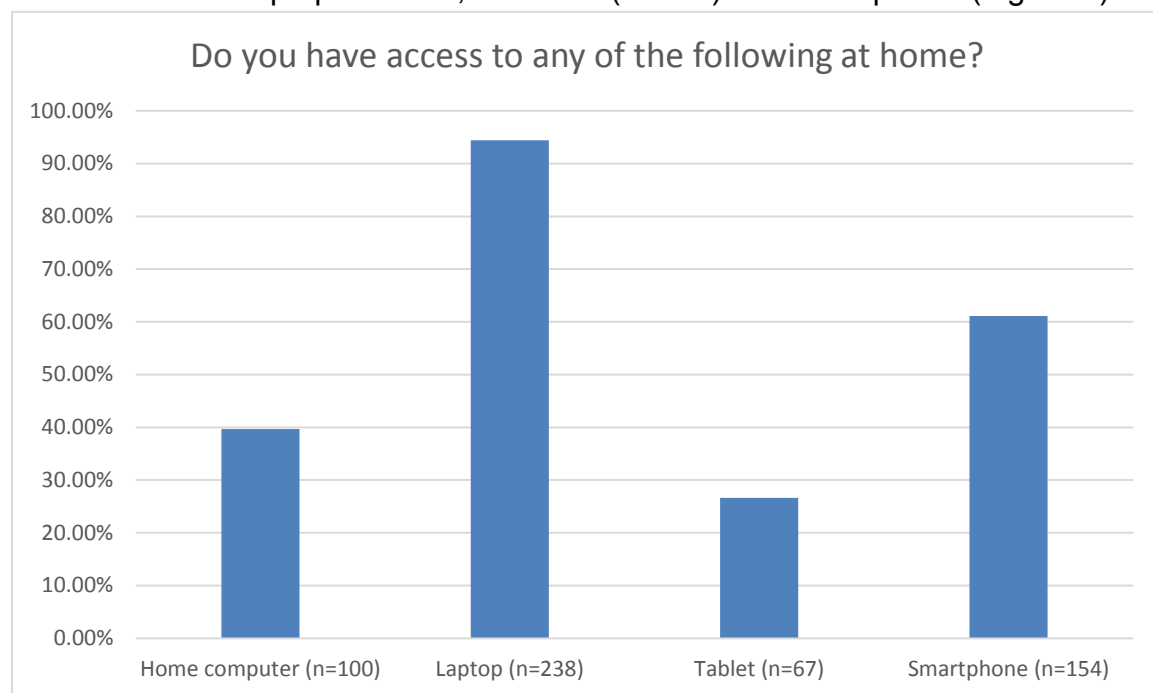


Figure 2 Devices respondents were able to access at home

It was also interesting to note that some students had access to two, three or four devices. In fact, a significant 10% (n=25) had access to four devices

Support for and during placement

Students were asked if they considered there was enough information on the library support available both before and during placements. 62% (n=156) did feel they received sufficient pre-placement information, although there are therefore a

significant number who didn't feel they did (21% (n=53) or were not sure (17% n=43).

One student commenting that

I only found out about [the] NHS library through another student and not [the] placement mentor or other staff

NHS librarians also noted that students did not always appear to know about resources.

Mentors were the single biggest source of support for students in practice with 16% (n=38) of students contacting them 'Often'. Both NHS and UWE libraries were significantly lower with 3% (n=7) each. The use of the UWE Chat service (24/7 online support) in fact scored slightly higher at 3.4% (n=8) but more significant was the number of those who "sometimes" accessed the service (24% n=57). UWE was one of the first UK universities to offer a 24-hour chat service. Called 'Ask a Librarian' or 'Chat', the instant message service enables students to contact librarians and receive an immediate response.

I found CHAT very helpful

The crucial role of access to information for mentors was raised in the AiP interview with the respondent suggesting how the university library could enhance the information provided

ARC, a repository of practice-related things is being developed...so the only thing I can suggest that you might want to consider...is to have a dedicated tab [for resources]

Discussion

The range of information received through the questionnaire and interviews was extremely rich and confirmed the wide variety of people and departments supporting students on placement. This reinforces the importance of having a clear strategy for collating and disseminating information, and that the strategy is co-ordinated effectively.

Developing the sharing of information between libraries is crucial in offering informed support as is considering routes to raise the profile of library support available. Librarians from both the NHS and HE were keen to see this happen and this is particularly apposite with the publication of Knowledge for Healthcare²² and its clarion call to develop our joint working and sharing of resources.

There are a number of themes arising from the research: use of *any* physical library whilst on placement was confirmed as low; factors included lack of awareness but more significantly, time constraints and convenience of access. The research indicates however that 50% (n=126) of students *still* think that accessing library resources is important. Riddington's research ¹⁵ revealed that UWE nursing students viewed access to library resources when on placement as very valuable and this is also highlighted in other studies ^{6,8,9,10}. *Our new research reflects recent changes in the UWE curriculum for less academic work in the form of assignments to be submitted during placements. This may explain the decrease in the perceived importance of library resources as compared with previous older studies. A further potential contributing factor is the increasingly growth and availability of electronic resources and services which are easily accessed away from the physical library space.*

The research indicates that 16.7% (n=42) of students use library resources for general studying purposes. A previous study at UWE, Bristol ¹⁵ *carried out before the aforementioned curriculum changes*, found a much higher percentage of students accessing resources for completing assignments. Providing NHS library colleagues with wider information on the detail of the programmes of study offered, in addition to sharing reading lists, is a development not mapped previously. Further work to identify the detail of the support from HE and NHS libraries which students found particularly useful would be valuable. Did the students seeking support and with whom NHS libraries spent more time, for instance, have assignments to resubmit, or need help with wider academic literacy skills?

The importance of access to a computer with Internet was a high priority for students as part of their overall placement experience. In fact Internet use is now seen as a vital form of communication, with access to all forms of social media of paramount importance in supporting the students' social wellbeing as well as their professional development.

Looking specifically at the differing experiences based on type of placement the research found:

- Parity of access to a computer with Internet between hospital and community
- Parity of study space between hospital and community
- Access to a library/resource centre in the community setting is lower than that in a hospital

The results echoed Lloyd ⁶ in that some students continued to report a frustration with access to computers both in clinical areas and in the library. Information on what is available in terms of IT before a placement starts could therefore be helpful to students. *The aspiration set out in the UK government's report Personalised Health and Care 2020 ²³ that greater funds are dedicated to improving digital technology such as free WIFI in health care settings ²⁴, will be of benefit not only to*

patients, but also staff and students using NHS sites encouraging a 'bring your own device' approach. This could have positive implications in terms of a reduction in the demand from students for PCs while on placement

As well as a strong emphasis on IT, there is also a significant number, over three quarters of students (77% n=197), carrying out academic study at home, and from a variety of Internet-connected devices. This figure both reinforces previous research⁶ and also highlights an ongoing trend towards high levels of online access to resources, facilitating the "study anywhere" philosophy by students. It is clear that the overwhelming availability of e-resources and their increasing ease of access have facilitated this shift. It is possible that time and work constraints, and the need to have a reasonable work vs life balance, mean that students prefer to study from home. Therefore, it is important that the Library Service continues to invest in electronic resources and services and takes advantage of the growth of new models of delivery. Taking this into account, the promotion of resources available via NHS Athens is central to the NHS libraries' offer. It is equally important that HE and NHS resources and services are mobile-compliant.

The research indicates that 61.9% (n=156) of students felt they received sufficient pre-placement information. This is higher than previously reported in Raynor¹⁷ where the figure was 50%, but consistent with Lloyd⁶. However, a figure of 38.1% (n=96) responded that they did not know or weren't sure and this suggests significant room for improvement. Feedback that "not enough attention was given to induction and training to access and use of library-based and electronic resources"¹⁶ suggests this remains an issue. Informing students of sources of support before placement, and if possible at the clinical location, would be useful. The use of technology enhanced learning opportunities to convey this information is an area we are keen to explore.

Mentors were considered one of the most important sources of support and this can be linked with the role they have in assessing student competency in practice. Providing information to this group on what libraries can offer both them and their students is therefore an additional important area of work for development.

Recommendations

Informed by our primary research and previous studies, the research team identified a number of recommendations for practice including:

- To continue to develop the role of the Placement Liaison Librarian in co-ordinating access to information and resources
- To develop our links with placement locations by connecting all subject librarians to an NHS library colleague for termly meetings and information exchange

- For South West HE and NHS librarians to hold an annual study day to share good practice
- To investigate the development of shared HE and NHS inductions for placement students
- To timetable pre-placement information sessions with students
- To map the availability of computer and WiFi Internet access at placement locations
- To review our webpage support both for mentors and students on placement
- To continue to develop our e-resources and technology enhanced support services
- To ensure full mobile compliance of our resources wherever possible

Further developments

As a result of our research the Professional Placement Office, which co-ordinates placements, has included questions on both university and placement libraries in the questionnaire students complete at the end of each placement. The results of this will inform our service offer for students in the future.

Limitations

Whilst the sample of questionnaires returned was an acceptable 10%, a larger response would have provided richer data. Questions were piloted with library colleagues, but in hindsight the structure of some questions could have been improved to eliminate any possible ambiguity in response. Given that adult nurses comprise the largest group of HSC students in the Faculty, and were the largest number of respondents in the study, there is a resulting emphasis on their views.

Conclusion

Our research sought to explore the experiences of HSC students on placement with regard to their library and information resource needs against the backdrop of rapid change in both the nature of information provision and in the HSC education environment. We have identified a number of themes in relation to students' experiences. Whilst there is a difference regarding access to a physical library for students on community-based placements, the significance of this is mitigated by the fact that the majority of students study at home, regardless of placement location. In addition, what is crucial to all students' experience is the provision of computer or Internet access to support their holistic needs, particularly whilst away from family, friends and peers. Through conducting desk and primary research we have identified a number of practical recommendations on how the library service can be developed to better support our students during the significant proportion of time spent away from the University. Our recommendations aim to make a real, positive difference to the experiences of students on placement. Furthermore, we believe the research

offers a unique contribution to the body of knowledge of LIS support by mapping themes at a time of particular digital and HSC change, to achievable, pragmatic solutions

The findings present a challenge for all libraries in the way we seek to engage students on placement, yet what is clear is that collaborative working is essential – the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. We will continue to work closely with all our library and academic partners, whilst at the same time making effective use of technologies which enable access to our resources and services.

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All data supporting this study are openly available from the UWE Research Data Repository at: <http://researchdata.uwe.ac.uk/142/>

Key messages

- Joint working between HE and NHS librarians is vital to maximise students' awareness and use of library and information resources and services
- Having a librarian with co-ordinating responsibility for placements is an important part of the service offer in HE libraries
- Maintaining and fostering relationships with the organisation's Professional Placement Office ensures that students have relevant information about their placement location
- Targeting refresher pre-placement information sessions at students about to embark on their first placement is timely and important
- Raising awareness among mentors in practice is a key way of getting accurate and up-to-date library information to students on placement