

Issues associated with retention in academic and practice settings: A qualitative investigation with Radiography students

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The aims and objectives

- To explore issues relating to the retention of students on an undergraduate pre-registration programme for Therapeutic Radiography
 - Characterise issues arising from the unique features of the students' practice and education;
 - Identify positive and negative aspects of student experience
- Inform support strategies to assist the students in coping with their programmes of study and improve retention on the courses.

Background

- Provision of a sufficient and able workforce in cancer care (DH, 2000a; DH, 2000b).
- High attrition (30%) in Radiotherapy compared to other health care professions (Blair, 2006)
- Recognition of change:
 - reported / observed levels of student stress and distress (anecdotal)
 - undergraduate funding / costs
 - student population

Settings compared

- Academic teaching learning & assessment:
 - student focused, self directed and questioning approach (Knowles, 1973)
 - Requires active learning (Rolfe & Sanson-Fisher 2002).
- Practice teaching learning & assessment:
 - Frequently observational (although physically active) apprentice model
 - Didactic, hierarchal, non-questioning

Methodology - Focus groups

Focus groups with BSc (hons) Therapeutic Radiography programmes (1st, 2nd & 3rd years in 2005)

Context:

Why do some students remain on their programmes of study whilst others leave even when they are confronted with similar circumstances?

- Reasons for choosing the course
- Support in the University
- Support on clinical placement
- The impact of student withdrawal
- Balancing the factors

Methodology – Thematic Analysis

1. Transcripts read to identify themes
2. Meeting to discuss and agree potential themes
3. One transcripts independently coded
4. Meeting to compare coding and refine definitions
5. Coding finalised for all transcripts

Emergent themes:

- A. Goals
- B. Ownership
- C. Support

Theme A: Goals

Students were motivated by the wish to achieve a goal. E.g. to get a job or to help people.

- “I really felt I wanted to get into something a little bit more professional”
- “I do voluntary work at a hospice so I’m around like cancer patients and stuff and just wanted to take more of an active role in the, actually helping them out”

Theme B: Ownership

Taking on responsibility for learning including: making suggestions, working with others, taking initiatives such as additional reading outside that stipulated by the course.

“a very close relative ended up with cancer and had some treatment so that’s how I got initially exposed to radiotherapy. So I read up about it”

“I think the strength in the group has been how involved you are together. It’s grown stronger; we look out for each other”

Theme C: Support

The effectiveness (or not) of academic support.

“We’re quite a small group so it’s quite nice actually because we feel that most of our lecturers are very approachable, we can go and talk to them anytime we have a problem.”

“I didn’t even know I had a mentor, I mean they’ve said and I think it rings a bell, yes we did have something like that but you know if you have an issue you go and see them, if you don’t then forget it.”

Overall Findings:

Goals

- Motivation for joining course strong – sustains commitment throughout course
- Commitment to the profession
- Work assured at end of course
- Positive feedback from patients

Ownership

- Peer/strong networks (missed during placement)
- Friendly students – cultural/age/gender diversity valued

Support

- Tutor/lecturers responsive/caring
- Quality of teaching high
- Quality of resources high (including LRC)

Conclusions

- **The issues arising from the academic/practice students experience**
 - **Goals**
 - **Support**
 - **Ownership**
- **Students valued**
 - **Small cohort size** (increasingly rare in HE)
 - **Professional career prospect**
 - **Support from peers**
 - **High profile cancer arena**

But.....

 - **Sources of support in clinical practice could be more clearly identified**

Changes being planned and Implemented

- Facilitation of the development of realistic goals
 - At selection/recruitment
 - On commencing practice placement
 - Increase involvement of users and carers in course delivery
- Increased awareness of the range of support available
 - Information dissemination
 - Induction strategies
 - Regular reinforcement through the tutorial system
- Encouragement of the feeling of ownership through:
 - Nurturing peer support

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