

Virtual placements in nursing education

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Nursing education in the UK requires a significant amount of practical experience and skills gained through clinical placements. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a shortage of clinical placement opportunities, creating challenges for universities and placement partners. To address this issue, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) recommended the use of virtual simulated placements to supplement traditional placements.

A safe environment

Virtual placements are virtual clinical placements that use simulation technology to provide nursing students with practical experience in a safe and controlled environment. Students interact with virtual patients through a computer-based simulation platform and receive feedback and guidance from peers and clinical facilitators.

Simulation scenarios are designed to challenge nursing students and develop critical thinking, decision-making and clinical reasoning skills. Evidence shows that simulation-based learning can improve student confidence, knowledge retention, and clinical competence.

Advantages

Virtual placements provide several benefits to nursing students, universities and placement partners. First, they provide an alternative to traditional clinical placements and overcome capacity issues. Nursing students can complete their clinical hours from anywhere with an internet connection. Second, virtual simulated placements provide a safe and controlled environment for students to develop their clinical skills without putting real patients at risk. Third, they provide a learning experience that reflects the rapidly evolving healthcare landscape, including skills in telehealth, digital health, and virtual care. They also provide an opportunity for nursing students to engage in interprofessional education and improve collaboration with other health professionals. Finally, they offer a cost-effective and sustainable solution to the challenges of traditional clinical placements, as they require fewer resources and provide greater accessibility.

Evidence for effectiveness

Virtual placements have shown substantial potential in addressing the challenges of providing nursing students with sufficient and varied clinical experiences. Various studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of these placements in enhancing student learning outcomes and preparing them for real-world clinical practice.

A study at the University of Huddersfield explored the development and integration of simulated practice placements using online and digital technologies. This initiative was driven by the need to secure clinical placements for pre-registration nursing students and to enhance their digital competence. The study found that these simulated placements effectively bridged the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, providing students with essential clinical experiences that are often difficult to secure in traditional settings (Sanderson et al, 2023).

Similarly, a pilot study evaluating a virtual simulated placement for mental health nursing students revealed high levels of approval from both students and staff. The virtual placements, implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, not only alleviated the pressure on hospitals but also maintained the continuity of student education. Students appreciated the opportunity to be taught by clinical experts and found the virtual placements to be beneficial in reducing social isolation and educational interruptions caused by the pandemic. This study underscores the potential for virtual placements to be a permanent addition to nursing education, particularly in fields such as mental health, where placement opportunities may be limited (Brook et al, 2023).

These findings are further supported by a broader review of virtual simulated placements across healthcare education. The review highlighted promising trends in improving student experiences, knowledge, communication and critical thinking skills through virtual simulated placements. Although there were gaps in stakeholder involvement and research design consistency, the overall impact of virtual simulated placements on student learning was positive, suggesting that virtual placements can effectively complement traditional clinical education (Samson et al, 2023).

‘Virtual simulated placements provide a safe and controlled environment for students to develop their clinical skills without putting real patients at risk’

Learning experiences

The evidence supports the integration of virtual placements into nursing education as a viable and effective method to enhance clinical training. These placements provide flexibility, reduce

the burden on healthcare facilities, and offer students comprehensive learning experiences that are crucial for their professional development.

References

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