University of Sunderland

Usage guidelines

Title:

Can an experiential learning programme promote reflective learning in undergraduate pharmacy students? A qualitative evaluation.

Abstract: (Please refer to instructions to authors and example abstract)

Focal Points:
- This study aimed to evaluate the implementation of a new experiential learning programme for undergraduate pharmacy students
- A combination of an ePortfolio and competency framework was effective in supporting reflective learning
- Students identified further support required to enable them to navigate the new programme of learning

Introduction: GPhC standards for the initial education and training of pharmacists state that students should receive practical experience as part of their training, potentially including off-site placements[1]. A system using an electronic personal portfolio (ePortfolio) and a competency framework was created to support reflective learning associated with practice placements. Practice placements are a compulsory component of the MPharm course, currently delivered in a variety of settings including community pharmacy, hospital pharmacy and general practice. The aim of this study was to explore students' initial experiences using the programme and to discover their perceptions of its effectiveness in supporting reflection and learning from practice placements.

Methods:

Two focus groups (FGs) were conducted in February 2016 following introduction of the new system in September 2015. All undergraduate MPharm students completing an ePortfolio (n=556) were invited to participate and informed written consent was obtained prior to the FGs. FGs were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analysed using thematic content analysis. The study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

Results: Two FGs consisted of a mixture of students in their first year of the MPharm programme (n=4), second year (n=2) and third year (n=7). A topic guide was designed based on the objectives of the programme. This was used to facilitate the focus groups. Six parent themes emerged from the analysis (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of themes from FGs evaluating a new experiential learning programme	
Parent themes	**Sub-themes**
Students' use of the new programme	Students using the competency framework to guide placement experience
	Retrospective and prospective selection of competencies
Benefits of the new programme	Enabling students to identify areas for improvement prior to placement
	Student ownership of placement experience
	Aiding reflective learning
	Reduced repetition in assessment
	Ability to track progression
Disadvantages of the new programme	Dependent on individual placement experience
	Reduced time with pharmacist (as working with whole pharmacy team)
	Time consuming nature of portfolio writing
Barriers for students using the programme	Managing expectations around placement experiences
	Difficulties in knowing where to start for students with little/no pharmacy experience
	Issues with self-assessment of performance
	Feelings of vulnerability associated with using a developmental framework
	Usability of electronic portfolio software
Suggested improvements	A mentoring system to support less experienced students
	Increased feedback to support self-assessment
	Further support materials around use of the experiential learning programme

Discussion:

The new programme has been successful in encouraging students to reflect upon their learning when undertaking pharmacy practice placements. Students identified requirements for further support around expectations of them as part the programme, how to self-assess their performance and the practicalities of building the portfolio. Similar requirements were found in a study done with fourth year pharmacy students around a prescribing portfolio[2]. Limitations to this study include the small sample size and that students self-selected into the focus groups which could have resulted in only more engaged students contributing to the data. Only students in higher years were able to compare the new and old programmes. Data from this study may inform the recently announced development of a pre-foundation framework by the RPS and BPSA. A quantitative study of these themes is planned to track the impact of any future improvements.

References:
1. General Pharmaceutical Council. GPhC Standards for the initial education and training of pharmacists. 2011. Available from: http://www.pharmacyregulation.org/sites/default/files/GPhC_Future_Pharmacists.pdf (Accessed 05 April 2016)
2. Ashcroft D and Hall J Pharmacy students' attitudes and views about portfolio-based learning: A questionnaire survey. *Pharmacy Education*. 2006; 6: 1-5.