

Quality assurance standards to underpin student placements in critical care units during post registration critical care educational programmes

Introduction

The provision of quality education for healthcare professionals requires collaboration between education providers and acute healthcare providers. It is important that systems are in place to enable students to learn in practice, to develop the skills required to provide the care for patients and families whilst meeting the standards set out by the statutory and professional bodies¹.

To compliment the *National Standards for Critical Care Nurse Education (CC3N, 2012)*² and the *National Competency Framework for Adult Critical Care Nurses (CC3N, 2013)*³ this paper has been prepared to set out the quality standards for the work place learning environment.

The aim of these standards is to define the responsibilities of critical care units when providing a work based placement area for nurses enrolled on post registration critical care courses being delivered in collaboration with Higher Education Institutes (HEI's) and other education providers. Clarity of understanding by each party of their roles and responsibilities is essential when working in partnership.

The standards should be used to inform the commissioning, planning, provision and the quality assurance of practice placement environments to ensure that students gain the most from their clinical placement during educational courses.

The effectiveness of clinical placements will depend on the partnership between education providers, health service providers and students. Each member of the partnership must ensure that the student's practice experience contributes to the learning outcomes consistent with the aims of the education programme. The practice placement settings must provide a safe and supportive environment for students.

The quality assurance standards focus on four key aspects:

- Relationship with HEI or education provider
- Practice learning environment
- Assessment in practice
- Student experience

Under normal circumstances benchmark assessments should be undertaken biennially unless there is significant change in the placement setting.

1.0 Relationship with HEI or education provider

The quality of student experience will be enhanced by effective two way communication between the placement area and the HEI or education provider. This will be achieved by:

- 1.1 Regular structured communication between the critical care unit and the HEI enabling clinical staff to contribute to programme planning, review and revalidation of courses
- 1.2 Post course evaluation to include analysis of pass, referral, fail and attrition rates and sharing of module evaluation and feedback mechanisms
- 1.3 Evaluation of the practice experience gained from students and action planning undertaken with clinical area where indicated
- 1.4 Provision of honorary contracts for HEI staff if and when required
- 1.5 Providing training programmes for mentor/assessors to meet the required standards (NMC, 2008)

2.0 Practice Learning Environment

It is essential to create a learning environment where students are able to access inter-professional learning opportunities and support to maximise personal achievements. The placement environment must:

- 2.1 Have the required facilities available to support student learning in practice and sufficient resources, which may include access to library services and information technology
- 2.2 Be able to provide students with learning opportunities to meet their programme learning outcomes and competency framework. Where this is not possible, arrangements should be made for students to visit other critical care units to gain the required learning opportunities
- 2.3 Have adequate numbers of appropriately prepared competent mentor/assessors to support students. Each student to be allocated a named mentor/assessor
- 2.4 Provide care underpinned by the best available evidence where evidence exists
- 2.5 Have a Clinical Educator with appropriate experience and qualifications, responsible for the coordination, promotion and delivery of education and training programmes and allocation of mentors
- 2.6 Have in place a student selection process

- 2.7 Have processes in place for dealing with concerns about the placement area
- 2.8 Have processes in place to address professional / conduct related issues
- 2.9 Clearly defined health and safety policies are in place to support students in the work-based environment ⁴.

3.0 Assessment in Practice

Assessment in practice is used for three main reasons: to promote learning; to certify achievements; and to provide data that can be used for quality assurance purposes. Competence assessment against the National Competency Framework for Adult Critical Care Nurses (CC3N, 2013) is a key component of post registration critical care courses and requires assessment within the clinical environment. All efforts should be made to ensure that assessment in practice is both accurate and fair ⁵. To facilitate this assessment process it is necessary that placement areas have:

- 3.1 Mentors who meet the required standards of the NMC(2008)
- 3.2 Mentors/ assessors who are able to demonstrate their ongoing professional development/competency within critical care and have knowledge of current evidence base
- 3.2 Mentors who assess student learning, enabling achievement of required learning outcomes using agreed framework
- 3.3 A live register database of mentors/ assessors
- 3.4 Mentors/ assessors with appropriate knowledge and information about the programme of study and the National Competency Framework for Adult Critical Care Nurses (CC3N, 2013)
- 3.5 Appropriate systems in place to ensure early identification of learning issues resulting in action plans and review dates
- 3.6 Clearly defined confidential process in the case of failure to progress or professional concerns

4.0 Student Experience & Feedback

Students are required to be active in their own learning. However, it is important that they are supported in identifying their learning needs and making the best use of the learning opportunities provided. It is also essential that students have the opportunity to provide feedback on their practice placement, therefore:

- 4.1 Each student will be allocated a mentor/ assessor at the start of their course

- 4.2 40% of learner clinical practice hours should allow for contact with a mentor/ assessor over the duration of the programme of study
- 4.3 Evidence of student / mentor contact is supported through rotas, assessment documentation and student feedback
- 4.4 The quality of the student /mentor relationship is evidenced through role modelling, incorporation of evidence based practice, constructive feedback in documentation, student feedback and staff appraisal

References

1. NMC (2008) Standards to support learning and assessing in practice. NMC, London.
2. CC3N (2012) National Standards for Critical Care Nurse Education.
3. CC3N (2013) Nationally Competency Framework for Adult Critical Care Nurse Education
4. UCEH (2009) Health and safety guidance for the placement of higher education students.
5. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2007) Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 9 Work-based and placement learning

