



Assessment of Students in Health and Social Care: MANAGING FAILING STUDENTS IN PRACTICE

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Making the most of this learning resource

Who might use this resource?

Anyone who is involved in supervising, supporting and assessing students in practice placements. These students will be undergoing health or social care pre-registration programmes leading to professional registration. The title used to describe staff with primarily an educational role in placements varies across professions. For the purpose of this learning resource the following definitions will be used:

Practice education is a generic term to cover placement learning in health and social care pre-registration programmes. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education uses the terms 'practice learning' and 'student placement' to cover the complete range of placement experiences provided by higher education institutions (HEI).

The **Practice educator** is the identified practitioner in the practice placement who facilitates the student learning face to face on a daily basis and generally has responsibility for the formative and/or summative assessment of competence.

Definitions adapted from: Making Practice Based Learning Work: A Case Study Report. An Overview of the Nature of Preparation of Practice Educators in Five Healthcare Disciplines

(2004:) http://www.practicebasedlearning.org/PBL_cs/pbl.swf
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education:
www.qaa.ac.uk

In preparing this resource, it has been assumed that you have undertaken or are undertaking training related to your role as a Practice Educator. This resource can be used independently or as part of a facilitated programme to initially prepare or update practice educators. You may wish to use all components or to simply dip in and out of sections, using some of student activities or ideas to suit your needs. Feel free to adapt or photocopy the materials, giving due acknowledgement to the source. Some of the material will be new and some may be familiar.

Why use this learning resource?

In your role as a Practice Educator have you ever had concerns about a student's performance in placement and been caught up in the dilemma of whether or not to fail them? The literature indicates that this is a problem across a number of professional groups; for example Duffy (2004a) in a research report commissioned by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), found that assessment of failing students in practice was problematic and challenging and that in some instances incompetent students were passing the practice element of their programmes. According to the findings the decision to fail a student is not as straightforward as it might seem. This learning resource will help you to unpack why that might be and to provide you with strategies to support you as a practice educator in such situations.

The challenges associated with failing students in practice are not new and not isolated to one health or social care profession. The reality of being a Practice Educator is that it is a complex and demanding role. When faced with a student with problems of attitude and competence one can feel isolated and unsure as to how to move forward positively.

This learning resource focuses specifically on managing underperforming students in practice and is designed for an inter-professional audience. Practice educators in all health and social care professions have a critical role as gate-keepers for the profession:

'Failing to tell students that they have not reached the required standards does not protect the interests of the public or professions and puts the patients who will be under their care at risk'.

Duffy (2004b, Page 9)

[http://www.nmc-uk.org/\(c0aofpj5xkxar54520vxpnrg\)/aFrameDisplay.aspx?DocumentID=581](http://www.nmc-uk.org/(c0aofpj5xkxar54520vxpnrg)/aFrameDisplay.aspx?DocumentID=581)

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Aim of this Learning Resource

To explore the principles of assessment in practice and their application in the context of managing failing students from a personal, professional and practice development perspective.

Intended Learning Outcomes of this Learning Resource

Having studied this learning package, you will be able to:

- Review the practice competencies related to your health or social care profession.
- Describe key principles of practice assessment.
- Discuss literature around the topic of failing students and apply this to your practice setting.
- Explore strategies to manage failing students using a practice scenario.

In addition, having undertaken the optional 360 degree self assessment review, you will be able to:

- Reflect upon your personal and practice development in relation to failing students and then construct and implement an individual action plan.

User Guide

The learning resource adopts a reflective approach to considering the practical issues faced within the Practice Educator role. By this we mean considering the challenges faced by practice educators with failing students in practice, exploring some strategies to manage these and then asking you to reflect upon your role and work out how you could use these strategies where required to enhance your personal practice. The student activities you will meet throughout are therefore aimed to promote reflection and action planning. If working independently it can be helpful to join up with a colleague to jointly tackle some of these activities.

Personal Aim

Having read about the scope of this learning resource, what do you hope to gain from your study of it? It might be useful to keep the notes you make while working through this together and use it as evidence of Continuing Professional Development for your personal portfolio or profile.

Student Activity 1: (5 mins)

Write down your personal learning aim.

Practice Assessment and Professional/Statutory Body Regulations

Each health and social care professional body has a role, amongst other things, in regulating the standards of a profession. This includes standards for the preparation of teachers and assessors in practice.

Student Activity 2: (15mins)

Visit the web site of your Professional or Statutory Body to remind yourself of the regulations which govern your profession in the preparation of practice teachers and your role as a gate keeper to your profession. Here are some useful web addresses:

<http://www.nmc-uk.org/>

Home page for Nursing & Midwifery Council's website. Information on standards for nurses, midwives and teachers in practice can be accessed.

[http://www.nmc-uk.org/\(5ypcexrbatct5a5534npf055\)/aArticle.aspx?ArticleID=83](http://www.nmc-uk.org/(5ypcexrbatct5a5534npf055)/aArticle.aspx?ArticleID=83)

This page on the Nursing and Midwifery Council's website can access the consultation document and final report of the 'Consultation on a Standard to Support Learning and Assessment in Practice'.

<http://www.cot.org.uk/>

British Association of Occupational Therapists/College of Occupational Therapists Homepage. Members can access information on teacher preparation.

<http://www.sor.org/public/app.htm>

Society of Radiographers' education approval process.

http://www.csp.org.uk/uploads/documents/csp_ace_scheme_guidance.pdf

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Accreditation of clinical educators in physiotherapy.
http://www.rcslt.org/docs/competencies_project.pdf
Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists competency framework.

<http://www.bda.uk.com/index.html>
Information on education and training for dieticians and clinical placement facilitators.

<http://www.gsc.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/1D9B7764-29FC-4710-8950-2714F51C208C/0/guidance.pdf>

<http://www.gsc.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/B785AA94-31A0-4C8E-98D8-06D1B53CB6CF/0/aqpta.pdf>
General Social Care Council guidelines for assessment of practice & requirements for the practice teaching award.

www.hpc-uk.org/
Health Professions Council homepage – regulates 13 professions including:

Dietetics:
<http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/professions/dietitians/>

Occupational Therapists:
<http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/professions/occupationaltherapists/>

Physiotherapists:
<http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/professions/physiotherapists/>

Speech and language therapists:
<http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/professions/speechandlanguage therapists/>

Radiographers:
<http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/professions/radiographers/>

Key Principles of Practice Assessment

This section is divided into 4 parts:

- **Definitions of Assessment**
- **Why Assess**
- **When to Assess**
- **Action Planning**

Definitions of Assessment

There are numerous and sometimes conflicting definitions of assessment (Nicklin et al 2000). Overall however, there are two main types of assessment:

Formative assessment

- Continuing and systematic appraisal of a student to determine the degree of mastery of a given learning task and to help the student/learner and teacher to focus on the particular learning necessary to achieve mastery.
- ‘Continuous assessment’ generally means intermittent assessment, but the focus is on the needs of individual student, not in terms of pass or fail but in terms of whether the practice based learning outcome criteria is met or not, the strengths of the students practice performance and areas that require improvement.
- The nature of formative assessment is essentially diagnostic (Walker 1997).

Summative Assessment

- An assessment of the extent to which a student has achieved outcomes/objectives for the practice placement as a whole, or a substantial part of it, contributing to the grading of a student for qualification for an award.

Why assess?

There are several reasons why assessment in practice is critical to the preparation of safe health and social care practitioners:

- To protect the public.
- To predict future behaviour.
- To judge the level of student achievement.
- To monitor student progress.

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- To motivate students.
- To measure effectiveness of teaching.
- To assess competence.

To expand upon this last point, Wood (1987) defines competence as:

‘the ability to use knowledge, product, and process skills and, as a result, act effectively to achieve a purpose’.

(Wood 1987, p. 249).

He goes on to make the following important distinction:

‘Competence refers to what a person knows or can do under ideal circumstances, whereas performance refers to what is actually done in existing circumstances’. (Wood 1987, p.249).

When to assess?

It is important to think about identifying formal staging posts for assessment and to ensure these are understood by the student and all involved. At a minimum, an initial interview and student self-assessment should start the placement, followed by a mid-placement assessment interview and then a final assessment interview. Lengthy placements of perhaps a year, common in some professions, will obviously require more interim staging posts for assessment.

Learning agreements could be seen to be at the heart of the practice educator-student relationship. The concept of a learning agreement embodies several key principles. They:

- Lie at the centre of adult learning.
- Promote ownership of the learning process, student self-confidence and personal effectiveness.
- Are a written record of what the student intends to learn.
- Allow others involved in the assessment process to support the students.
- Identify learning outcomes and how they will be accomplished.
- Must be observable, measurable and time specific.
- Require criteria for evaluation.
- Generate an action plan.

Initial Assessment Interview

The aim of this interview is firstly for the practice educator and student to formally meet and share their understandings and expectations of the placement. Secondly, this interview should be used to consider placement specific and individual learning needs and from this, to help the learner to formulate an action plan.

In preparation for their initial assessment interview, it is useful to encourage students to self-assess their learning needs. In doing this, the student will be actively contributing to the assessment process and subsequent discussions with the practice educator will be more structured and concise.

Mid-placement assessment interview

The aim of this assessment interview is to formally record progress against the action plan, identify areas of strength and specifically identify areas where further progress is essential before the end of placement. The action plan may be renegotiated in the light of this discussion.

Final placement assessment

The aim of this assessment interview is to finally review the action plan and complete the assessment documentation outlining student achievement and progress throughout the placement. If action planning has been effective throughout the placement, this interview should hold few surprises for the student. Not only will the student have a clear idea of their progress to date, but they will also know what areas they need to subsequently focus upon.

Action Planning

An action plan should:

- Identify areas for development.
- Identify actions needed to achieve learning outcomes.
- Detail how this will be achieved.
- List success criteria to know how outcomes have been achieved (e.g. benchmarks, performance criteria).
- Date for achievement.

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Success criteria supplied by the student to evidence that outcomes have been achieved might include a range of evidence such as:

- Observations and critical analysis from practice.
- Feedback from practice educator, teams, patients, clients, carers and relatives.
- Critical incident analysis.
- Guided Reflection.
- Anonymised placement-based documentary evidence e.g. care plans, care pathways, assessment tools.
- Practice-focused education resources.
- Critical reading.
- Assessment documentation.

Literature on 'failing students' in health and social care practice

There is now a significant body of literature that explores issues around the management of failing students in health and social care practice. A sample is included for you to consider.

Student Activity 3: (45 mins)

Read one paper. Summarise key points and their relevance to your role as a Practice Educator.

Baldry Currens, J. A. (2003) The 2:1 Clinical Placement Model. *Physiotherapy*. 89(9): 540-54.

Burgess, R., Phillips, R., Skinner, K. (1998) Practice Placements That Go Wrong. *Journal of Practice Teaching*, vol 1(2) pp,48-64

Clouder, L. (2003) Becoming Professional: Exploring the Complexities of Professional Socialization in Health and Social Care. *Learning in Health and Social Care*. 2(4): pp213-222.

Dolan, G. (2003) Assessing Student Nurse Clinical Competency. Will we ever get it right? *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, Vol 12, pp 132-141.

Ilott, I. (1996) Ranking the Problems of Fieldwork Supervision Reveals a New Program: Failing Students. *British Journal of Occupational Health*. 59(11): pp525-528.

Milner, T., O'Bryan, P. (1998) The Impact of Failing Student on Tutors. *Social Work Education* Vol 6 (1) p 21-30.

Scanlon, J., Care, W., Gester, S. (2001) Dealing With the Unsafe Student in Clinical Practice. *Nurse Education Today*. Vol 26(1) pp 23-27.

Sharp, M. (2000) The Assessment of Incompetence: Practice Teachers' Support Needs When Working With Failing DipSW Students. *Journal of Practice Teaching*. 2(3): 5-18.

Identifying failing students: a case scenario

The section looks at failing students and the issues and challenges for the practice educator. A practice scenario is used which invites you to discuss, debate and critically reflect about students who cause concern in relation to attitude and professional behaviour, and why they are sometimes 'given the benefit of the doubt'.

You may wish to pair up with another colleague or get some peer discussion going to get alternative views on this critical aspect of assessing in practice.

Why did nobody say something sooner?

Setting the scene:

The story is about Jasmine, a final year student who is about to have an end of practice placement assessment with Karen, her practice educator. Jasmine has a bubbly personality. She has visible body piercing, notably the tongue and nose and bright red and pink hair, both factors that 'raise a few eyebrows in practice'. To date she has passed all the practice performance criteria, but her frequent lateness to arrive on time in practice has caused concern. In addition, the heavy odour of smoke on her clothing has been noticed by staff and some clients have complained that it is offensive. Her boyfriend Pete keeps ringing her at work and Jasmine has been reported to have

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used the work phone on several occasions for personal calls. However, the issue of professional behaviour and boundaries has to date gone unchallenged.

Karen is Jasmine's Practice Educator. Karen has been qualified for five years and is well liked by the students. She tries to make the learning environment enjoyable and is a motivated and supportive assessor. She is always prepared to give students the benefit of the doubt and believes that if students fail or are unhappy it is a personal failing on her part.

Shirley is a senior practitioner who been qualified for over twenty years and is concerned that nobody has challenged Jasmine about her behaviour. She feels strongly that 'in her day' Jasmine's appearance, lateness, smoking, and use of the phone for personal calls would not have been acceptable. She believes that Karen should say something and is annoyed that Jasmine appears to have been given the benefit of the doubt by Karen.

Student activity 4 (30 mins)

Click here to access the web-link for the video:

<http://www.practicebasedlearning.org/resources/materials/failing.wmv>

Now you have seen the video, make notes and if possible discuss with others or reflect independently using the following as prompts:

- Give a brief description of the scenario as you see it.
- Do you think Jasmine's overall behaviour was acceptable? If not, why?
- Comment on how you think the situation has been managed before Jasmine's final interview.
- Do you think Karen's attitude/approach to Jasmine is justified? If so, explain your reasons.
- What role do you think emotions play in how Jasmine was handled?
- Do you think the communication between the placement staff could be enhanced? If so how?
- Would you have dealt with the situation in the

same way up to this point? After all, it stated that Jasmine had previously had an initial and mid-placement assessment interview. If not, how would you have dealt with Jasmine?

- How do you think Jasmine was feeling prior to the interview? Do you think this affected the way she might respond to Karen?

Further issues to consider the around case scenario

Certain issues could have been considered before discussion with Jasmine:

- Had Jasmine breached any policies or procedures that would have left her open to accusations of misconduct and disciplinary action? Are there any policies in your placement areas to cover 'incidents' that Jasmine was involved in? (e.g. uniform policy, use of mobile phones, lateness policy, sickness and absence policy).
- Had Jasmine breached any professional guidelines/boundaries? Is there a student charter in your area which addresses issues of professional behaviour and do students have to sign up to it?
- Was Jasmine aware of the accountability and responsibility to her profession that her role demanded?
- Was Jasmine aware of the effect she was having on some of her clients?
- Did Jasmine have an action plan to work to, from her initial or mid-placement interviews?

Summary and overview of issues from the scenario

- What do you think Karen should have been trying to achieve?
- Why don't you think Karen said anything?
- Why don't you think Shirley said anything?
- What were the good and not so good points about how Jasmine was managed?
- What are the implications for Jasmine's practice as a result of Karen's failure to address the issues?

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- What are the implications for Karen?
- What are the key things that you have learnt from watching the video and discussion/reflection?
- How might this influence your future practice?
- Identify any learning needs you may have from reviewing the scenario.

Managing failing students: the role of action plans and feedback

This section encourages you to reflect upon your own experiences as a practice educator and your management of any failing students you have had in your practice placement. You are also invited to complete an optional self assessment via a 360 degree review and formulate a personal action plan.

In your role as a practice educator, have you ever had concerns about a student's practice performance or professional behaviour and been caught up in the dilemma of whether or not to fail them? Duffy(2004) recommends professional behaviour and attitude should be given prominence within the assessment process. Practice educators found it difficult to fail students who had attitude problems if they had met the practical criteria.

Student activity 5 (10 mins)

- How would you define or articulate poor attitude or poor professional behaviour?
- How can attitude be measured?
- Ask a colleague to do the same and discuss your answers.

When identifying weak students, the main problems (after a 'settling in' period) that Duffy (2004a) found were:

- Poor communication and interpersonal skills.
- Lack of interest and failure to participate in practice learning.
- Persistent lateness.

- Lack of personal insight.
- Lack of insight into professional boundaries.

So, when faced with the above problems in a student, what is required of you?

We suggest:

- Early exploration and intervention with the student e.g. ask why they appear to lack interest or are constantly late.
- Fairness. Avoid making assumptions and jumping to conclusions.
- Clear articulation of expectations.
- Prompt removal of obstacles to allow facilitation of progress.
- Negotiation of learning opportunities.

If the problems do not resolve, you need to:

- Give formal written feedback at an early stage.
- Arrange tripartite meeting with student, practice educator and appropriate parties from higher education institution.
- Develop an action plan agreed by all parties.
- Arrange regular formal practice educator/student progress and feedback meetings.
- Give the student every opportunity and support to progress.
- Recognize that some students need to fail.

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Student activity 6 (20 mins)

Draw up a mid-placement assessment action plan (see template below) of how you would address and resolve the key issues identified in the video. You may wish to role play in small groups giving feedback to Jasmine and the subsequent negotiation of an action plan.

A Negotiated Action Plan Template

Area for Development	Actions Needed	How actions will be achieved	Success criteria	Date for achievement
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Signatures: Practice Educator:.....Student.....

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The Decision to Fail

Giving the benefit of the doubt is not a new problem, but professionals have a duty of care to acknowledge and accept that some students will fail. However, failure can have emotional consequences for student and practice educator. Students' emotions may vary from being upset and distraught to being angry, intimidating and projecting blame onto others. Practice educators may be left feeling sad, exhausted or even relieved. Some may be angry that other colleagues have 'failed to fail' the student on previous practice placements, whilst others may feel that they had 'let the student down'. Some may blame the University for accepting the student on the course in the first place.

Student activity 7 (45 mins)

Think of any experiences you have had when assessing students and using the points you have identified in your notes on Jasmine, reflect on:

- An assessment situation which went well.
- An assessment where you had to address an under-performing student.

You can use any framework for reflection with which you are familiar but it should include:

- Description of the experience with the student - this can include thoughts, feelings, any important key issues or features (positive or negative) that stood out for you.
- Internal (e.g. your knowledge base) or external (e.g. workload, the student themselves) factors which may influenced your feelings/behaviour/decision making when dealing with the student.
- Consideration of anything that you may have done differently. Think how this might relate to your experience with future students. Identify any learning that has occurred for you and any further learning that you might need to do.

Construct an action plan for an under-performing student you have had to critically assess.

Giving Feedback

Welsh (2003), Duffy (2004a), and Downie and Bashford (1998) all acknowledge there is little problem providing positive feedback to a student and that some consider that it is the university's problem to fail a student in practice and not the role of placement staff. In reality it is a joint responsibility. To some extent, failure can even be prevented or if inevitable, can be facilitated through clear feedback mechanisms. Feedback on performance is crucial to the development of positive attitudes in learners. In addition it is important for:

- Motivating learners.
- Re-enforcing good practice.
- Providing information on progress in order to develop self awareness and confidence.
- Establishing the level of performance the learner should be achieving.
- Providing the basis for a negotiated action plan for the student to work to.

Some points to consider when giving feedback are:

- When to give feedback.
- Whether to include others' views in the feedback process. Could these include views of peers?
- Whether to encourage students to analyse their own performance.
- Always concentrate on the positive before the negative.
- Always provide positive alternatives to improve performance.

Downie and Bashford (1998) offer some tips which you might find helpful:

- Arrange a suitable time and place and inform the student. The location should be private, quiet and as relaxed as possible. You might even want to provide a cup of coffee to help create a more relaxed environment and promote a constructive dialogue
- If you anticipate things might get a little difficult

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and you feel you need moral support, then arrange for a colleague who knows and has worked with the student to join you or invite the link lecturer if this is possible to your practice area. Make sure the student knows who is going to be there in advance of the meeting. They might feel quite threatened if you go in 'mob-handed' without their prior knowledge.

- Ensure all the required assessment documentation is completed accurately and that all your previous meetings and the outcomes of those meetings are recorded as fully as possible.
- From the outset, try to create a safe and friendly environment by being relaxed and as informal as possible. Do not, of course, overdo this as you are ultimately going to give the student bad news and it would be rather cruel to lull them into a false sense of security.
- A useful opening strategy is to turn the focus onto the student by asking them their views on their progress. If they are aware of the problems during the practice placement, ask the student to carry out a self assessment either on paper or verbally. You may save yourself considerable time and anxiety if the student is self-aware enough to tell you why they may not have performed their best and identifies for you where the student thinks the areas of weaknesses are. If the student is lacking in self-awareness then this strategy has limited value but it does allow the student to have a voice before you break the bad news.
- It is quite constructive in giving feedback to someone who has not performed well to provide feedback in what is sometimes called a 'praise sandwich'. Start by giving the student something positive about their progress and performance; then discuss areas that need improvement. Complete your feedback with another positive statement.
- Allow the student to question what you have said and discuss any issues they may have until they

feel they understand the outcome.

- If the student will not accept your judgement then utilise your colleague to support what you have said so that the discussion does not descend into stalemate. It is much more difficult for someone to argue with two people of shared opinions that it is with one.
- Provide the student with advice about how you think their performance could be improved in the future.
- Ensure all the documentation is signed by yourself and the student and returned to the appropriate place/person as soon as possible.
- Your link lecturer for your workplace should already be aware of a problem situation but if not, ensure that they are informed immediately.

Student activity 8 (20 mins)

Thinking of the scenario with Jasmine and Karen, how would you give feedback to her? You have already developed an action plan with her at mid-placement interview and could use this as a basis for discussion. Write down some notes that you could refer to in her final interview. Would you do this alone or invite a colleague or Jasmine's tutor to be present?

Self Assessment Review

You may wish to use the study of this learning resource as evidence of continuing professional development (CPD) purposes. With this in mind we have included this optional 360 degree Self-assessment review.

Student activity 9 (30 mins)

You may like to undertake a self-assessment in order to identify your strengths and areas for improvement in relation to managing failing students in practice. The following format may be a useful template for you to print off and use:

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Personal Development Action Plan

Practice Educator name:

Date completed:

Hours spent reading/discussing/undertaking student led activities:

Personal Learning points from the resource pack:

Plan for implementation of new knowledge from reading and discussion:

Signed:

Summary and Conclusion

We hope you have found this learning resource useful. The aim was to help you to revisit and further explore the principles of assessment and their application in the context of managing failing students in practice. Having studied this package you should now be able to:

- Outline the practice competencies related to a selected health and social care profession.
- Describe the key principles of practice assessment.
- Discuss some literature around the topic of 'failing students' and apply this to a specific practice setting.
- In addition, having undertaken the optional self assessment, you should be able to:
- Reflect upon personal practice as a practice educator with failing students.

Student activity 10 (5mins)

Revisit your personal aim. Has it been achieved?

Concluding comments....

The consequences of not failing incompetent students:

- Does not protect the interests of the public and puts patients/clients who will be under their care at risk.
- Have detrimental effects for the professions and the standards they seek to uphold.
- Mean we fail in our duty of care to safe-guard the safety of those we serve.

'So if you are thinking of giving the student the benefit of the doubt then you should firstly consider whether it is in the best interests of the patients, your clients, the student, subsequent Practice Educators and professionals as a whole'.

Duffy 2004b p.9, Nursing Midwifery Council News, July 2004

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Accessed 10/10/05

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Credits

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PROJECT AIMS

The Project aims to make practitioners more effective at supporting & supervising students in the workplace across a range of healthcare disciplines.

The professions involved in the project are:

- Dietetics
- Nursing
- Occupational Therapy
- Physiotherapy
- Radiography

The principal questions to be addressed in this project are:

- What constitutes effective practice in placement education?
- How can effective practice be implemented at organisational, professional and practitioner levels so as to maximise student learning on placement?
- How can this good practice be developed and embedded in the contexts of health and social care within a multicultural workforce?

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