CAITE

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

Placement experience:
The importance of *'belonging'*

What is the issue/ problem this resource will help to address?

Context setting

This resource is addressing the concerns of students who are going onto placement in the UK & overseas. It considers how to respond to concerns felt, and sometimes raised, by students about experiences related to race, racism and religion, and how to proactively provide support, prior to the placement taking place.

How should the resource be used and by whom?

The resource can be used by academic staff and professional services staff who are involved in setting up, managing & supervising placements, and in supporting students once they are on their placement.

The resource

- What should one do?

Both practicalities and intrinsic/extrinsic factors can lead to students feeling worried or anxious about participating in a placement where they are going to be living and working away from the familiar environments of home and university.

Some of the practical concerns that students raise are:

- Practice of faith – for example, getting access to spaces for worship/prayer; being able to obtain the correct foods in local shops to follow a particular diet.

- Hairdressers & hair/beauty products – being able to access hairdressers with expertise in styling and caring for black hair; being able to buy specialist hair and skin care products locally.

- Location - students' perceptions of their placement location can have an impact on their confidence about undertaking the placement, including whether the location is rural/urban; whether there is a majority white population (or not); whether there are established faith communities in that area.

- The support available when racism/micro-aggressions occur and how to deal with these in unfamiliar cultural contexts.

- Concerns about being far from their family (because their family are a source of support or because the student has a key family role e.g. providing income/care provision).

- Needing to use public transport.

Placement experience: The importance of 'belonging'

Placement sees a time of transition and change in personal identity and self- concept. Students tend to enter their placement under the moniker of student or trainee (insert chosen profession here), then grow into an early professional in their field as they gain more and more invaluable experiential learning. The person in transition is required to assimilate new knowledge, alter behaviour and therefore adjust the concept of self in a social context. (Meleis,1991).

Personal and interpersonal skills develop through this time of great change and adaptation. Our students may be asked to attend placements in locations, communities, establishments and see practices that present challenges to them.

These challenges occur on social, cultural and emotional levels, as well as those of the intensive, immersive learning experience offered by placement.

Anti-racism in placement settings

Opposition to racism and the active intent to oppose racism, rather than be non-racist, is a big challenge for large organisations who offer student placement. The anti-racist agenda calls for action, whilst also perhaps admitting that organisations and services must do better for their service users and for the staff that work there.

The health service is one such organisation and particularly relevant for our particular programme, however, the issues raised are universal. Zero tolerance policy (2018) espouses anti-racist values but services still have a journey to reach this desired outcome. For example, in their 2021 anti-racist statement, Pennine care NHS trust disclose that Black, Asian and minority ethnic colleagues reported higher rates of bullying and harassment and felt restricted in career progression. (ref). The statement is clear that improvements should be made.

Students and early career professionals report similar stereotyping and incidence of micro-aggression. In her blog, dated, Feb 2021 for the British Medical Journal, Aggarwal, a foundation year 2 doctor writes:

> *Despite being an FY2 doctor, still at the beginning of my career, I have already experienced and witnessed many acts of racial discrimination in the NHS. As a medical student, I was repeatedly asked if my parents had forced me to study medicine. It is a well-worn stereotype that Asian parents encourage their children to pursue secure careers with good pensions, such as medicine, law, and accounting. But by being asked that question I was put into a box, and, as a teenager (still protected, still naïve), I didn't even realise it. Would a white student be asked the same question?*

She describes the stereotyping inherent in staff attitudes towards her and her colleagues, commenting on the impact of name and skin colour on professional advantage:

> *I have even heard a white colleague declare that they struggle to remember the names of Asian doctors because "they all look the same." Remembering someone's name is a basic sign of respect, something my white colleagues receive automatically. If a senior staff member cannot remember or be bothered to learn your name, you've not only been reduced to the colour of your skin and the stereotypes someone has assigned to it, you are also immediately disadvantaged professionally.*

Working in a public facing role also presents the same challenge and racist rhetoric. Aggarwal's blog continues and she describes incident's where patients have refused treatment from colleagues based on skin colour and where patients have assumed she could not communicate well enough in English to possibly provide the appropriate standards of care.

Students report similar problems and challenges in their placement experiences:

For example, A DMU graduate recalls a time in clinic to help current students understand and build resilience for their own practice. She describes lone working (indirect supervision) when visited by a patient who directly accused her of involvement in the Manchester arena bombing in 2017. She has also been asked her ethnic origin many times, there is often shock and challenge from patients, their relatives and colleagues alike when she explains she is from the Netherlands.

Placement naturally enables the student to witness, absorb and emulate behaviours of staff members, patients, members of the public or service users too. As a bystander the student needs our support and encouragement to feel able to call out acts of racism, discrimination or microaggression. To do this requires confidence, a sense of belonging and robust support structure that shores up this sense of belonging with a secure foundation.

Placement, stress and anxiety

Stress is noted in the nursing literature as contributing to student anxiety, nervousness and inhibition (Groebecker 2015). This particular study explored the concept of sense of belonging and perceived stress among nursing students. Groebecker noted that students on placement can feel overwhelmed by sensory elements such as sights, sounds and smells, experienced, possibly for the first time. This is certainly true for students, perhaps for whom this is their first experience of working, or who perhaps have only ever been a patient, relative, or informal interpreter, in a healthcare setting.

The study also indicates that students who feel stressed appear less confident in their knowledge, learning, skills and abilities. Less confident students in this study were also presumed by staff to be less competent. However, where they were well-supported by senior staff, the student experienced much higher levels of adaptation and socialization and confidence increased. It is clear then, that close working relationships with placement providers and supervisory and senior staff in setting is key to our ability to support our students. It is also a pivotal relationship for a student to feel demonstrably confident in their skills and knowledge to tackle feelings of stress that may develop as emotional responses to the learning challenge they encounter.

The importance of developing strong staff-student relationships

The staff-student relationship is key to a sense of belonging and the creation of a positive placement learning experience. Lecturing staff can initiate this feeling by building the bridge between campus and placement life.

Harter et al. (2003) suggest four elements required for workplace engagement:

1. clarity of expectations
2. feelings of contribution to the organization
3. feeling a sense of belonging to something beyond oneself
4. feeling as though there are opportunities to discuss progress and grow

Setting expectations, being open about the challenge and racist or discriminatory behaviours others have experienced is key. Including these experiences creates a space for more open dialogue and indicates students can and should report their experiences too.

Starting early discussion about what placement looks like and open discussion of the geographical areas covered, experiences of previous cohorts, support structures in place and nature of the staff team in situ can all be useful strategies to build the bridge and create a picture of what placement may feel like to the student.

Alumni experiences, such as a 'placement panel' offer great insight too for the student and valuable peer learning that staff members cannot replicate. Alumni, for our students are more directly self-relatable and as such their experiences, opinions and candid case stories are much more powerful learning opportunities.

Lecturing staff will also need to work well with placement providers to ensure good relationships develop between our students and their hosts. It is useful here, particularly in a healthcare setting to note the competing priorities and demands placed on practitioners on placement too. Regular contact and support from lecturing staff are key.

Interactions between students and their in-placement supervisors or team are an important factor and hold much influence over sense of belonging (ref 2009). In a 2009 study Levett-Jones et al. explored the experiences of nursing students in clinical placement. The students reported that much of their sense of welcome and belonging developed through being included in informal moments, such as breaks and in general conversation. Down-time experiences were highlighted as key relationship builders where informal socialization can progress. Where staff also showed students that they were supportive of their learning and committed to helping their progression students reported a focus on the learning experience, rather than on workplace dynamics, organisational culture and interpersonal relationships.

Becoming involved in informal networks and socialization on placement can be a challenge. Especially for students whose backgrounds and cultural identities are vastly different to those they work alongside. Cultural references and value systems often serve to aid our connection but can also present barriers and the development of mutual understanding where they differ. For example, a past student who used breaktimes to practice their faith may missed opportunities for interpersonal chat with colleagues and was perceived as someone disinterested in developing friendship bonds or socialising with the team. Involving our networks, such as university faith leaders, can really help here to advise and offer both practical and emotional support from the right, culturally relevant source.

How do we address these concerns with students?

What works?

Anticipating that these might be concerns for students and having information, or sources for information, available should the questions be asked, is helpful, as is providing time and space in which concerns about placements can be raised. It is useful to draw on the lived experiences of other students/alumni or staff who have worked in the sector in addressing student concerns. Ensuring that students are aware of employer policies and support around reporting and responding to microaggressions and incidents of racism in the placement workplace is important, as is making sure that students know about DMU policies and support when they are on campus, such as No Space for Hate.

Case study: Audiology's pre-placement panel

Academic staff running the Audiology placement module requested support from the Student Welfare team in addressing the high number of student queries and concerns that were raised prior to their first professional placement. Student concerns centred around issues such as lacking confidence and feeling anxious about embarking on this element of the course and making the transition from student to professional working lives.

The students on BSc Audiology tend to be drawn from the East Midlands region. Many of the cohort live in the Leicester or Birmingham areas and are Muslim. Audiology clinical placements are located across England and students are often required to move temporarily to accommodate this PSRB required element of their course.

Many of the concerns being raised with academic staff related to students being able to practice their faith whilst on placement, and how the practice of their faith might be perceived, in areas outside of the Midlands. The academic staff for this module is white and not of Muslim faith, and so they felt ill-equipped to address these questions.

In December 2019 we ran the first of our Pre-placement Question Time Panel events within the Professional Healthcare Science Practice two module. We recruited a panel of staff and course alumni to answer student questions about going on to placement. The panel consisted of:

- University Muslim Chaplain
- University Faith Advisor
- Student Welfare staff member (chairing the panel)
- Alumni, with experience in both NHS and private practice workplaces (as many as can attend)
- Clinical educators from practice
- Training leads in the sector
- University placement team representative

Students were timetabled to attend, and following a brief introduction to the event and to the panel members, they worked in pairs to identify their questions about placement for the panel. These were submitted anonymously and the panel chair grouped these into themes. The panel were then asked to respond to the questions.

In subsequent years alumni have also kindly sent in written responses to semi-structured interview questions, with written permission to show these experiences to student groups.

In analysing the questions posed during these events we noted recurring themes which included:

- Race, racism and responses to these experiences

- Practising a faith within a workplace

- Building relationships with other members of your team

- Living and building a social life in a new area

- Dealing confidently with patients

Student evaluations of these sessions make clear that they value the input of alumni who offer near peer support, and students report increased confidence about starting their placement and increased knowledge of Student Welfare services at DMU, post event. The panel event also enables students to start to build their professional networks (they often informally share contact details with alumni). By including faith advisers, we ensure that advice is culturally appropriate.

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