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PARTNERING FOR WELLBEING AND ENABLING RECOVERY

Annex 5: Education and Development Report



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1.0 Introduction

The development of a new regional Mental Health Nursing Model for Northern Ireland (NI) necessitated the inclusion of perspectives from those directly involved in mental health nursing education across undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Engagement was undertaken with lecturers from the region's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including; Ulster University (UU), Queen's University Belfast (QUB), and the Open University (OU), as well as representatives from the Clinical Education Centre (CEC) and Trust-based Practice Education Facilitators. This collaboration sought to capture informed perspectives on the current provision of pre-registration and postgraduate programmes, alongside broader views on the future direction of mental health nursing.

The future of mental health nursing care is inextricably linked to the quality and responsiveness of its educational infrastructure. Individuals responsible for educating, supporting, and mentoring students and practitioners therefore constitute a critical stakeholder group. Their influence extends to shaping professional identity, ensuring the development of knowledge and clinical competence, and informing the evolution of future service delivery models.

Capturing the perspectives of education providers on contemporary mental health nursing education and practice is essential to informing future models of care. In particular, exploring their insights offers an opportunity to identify strengths, challenges, and areas for development within the current system. This includes opportunities to enhance educational provision, improve clinical placement experiences, strengthen therapeutic practice, and better understand factors influencing transition and retention in the early years of professional practice. Collectively, these insights will be instrumental in shaping a sustainable and responsive future for mental health nursing in NI.

2.0 Background and Purpose

NIPEC undertook a regional review of mental health nursing education to inform the development of a new Mental Health Nursing Model for NI. Central to this review was recognition of the pivotal role played by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the Clinical Education Centre (CEC), and Trust-based Practice Education Teams in preparing and sustaining the current and future mental health nursing workforce.

Engagement with these stakeholders was intended to explore, in a collaborative and systematic way, how the education system can evolve to ensure that mental health nursing students and practitioners receive high-quality, timely, and relevant education across all stages of their professional development.



The purpose of this paper is to synthesise the insights generated through this engagement into a structured evidence base. This evidence aims to inform strategic education reform, support workforce development, and ultimately contribute to the delivery of a responsive and sustainable mental health nursing service across the region.

3.0 Methodology

To inform the development of this project, four tailored online surveys were distributed across key stakeholder groups: undergraduate educators, postgraduate educators, Health and Social Care (HSC) Practice Education Teams, and the Clinical Education Centre (CEC), as outlined in Appendix 1. Each survey was designed to capture respondents' experiences, perceptions, and priorities in relation to the aims of the review. Despite wide dissemination, response rates were lower than anticipated.

In response, and following consultation with stakeholders, a focus group approach was adopted to facilitate more in-depth engagement. A single online focus group was convened, bringing together representatives from all stakeholder groups, and was guided by a series of pre-determined semi-structured questions (Appendix 2).

The session commenced with introductions and an overview of the NIPEC mental health nursing review. The purpose of the focus group was clarified, alongside assurances regarding confidentiality and appropriate disclosure. Participants were provided with a set of guiding questions to support discussion and were invited to submit additional reflections following the session.

A qualitative, practice-oriented approach was employed, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2021)¹ reflexive thematic analysis. The focus group transcript was analysed inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from participant accounts. Contributions from Higher Education Institution (HEI) programme leads and lecturers, CEC programme leads, Practice Education Teams, and senior nurses were included in the analysis. This facilitated the identification of patterns and themes across the educational continuum, spanning undergraduate, postgraduate, and specialist levels of training.

¹ Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive)thematic analysis?* Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18(3), pp. 328-352.



4.0 Focus Group Profile

Participants represented a broad cross-section of mental health nursing education in Northern Ireland, including:

- **University-based educators** teaching undergraduate, postgraduate, and specialist modules;
- **Clinical Education Centre (CEC) programme leads** delivering post-registration education;
- **Senior nurses, Practice Assessors and Practice Education Team representatives from within HSC Trusts.**

This profile ensured a comprehensive insight into the educational continuum and its operational challenges.

The group contributed perspectives across:

- Curriculum design and delivery;
- Clinical placement supervision;
- Range of psychological interventions;
- Physical health skills and NMC proficiency requirements; and
- System-wide learning pathways and workforce expectations.

5.0 Focus Group Thematic Findings

- **Theme 1 Student Experience:** Participants reported that undergraduate students consistently report a strong preference for mental health specific modules due to their direct relevance to practice with shared modules (e.g. leadership, pharmacology) often perceived as generic or adult-focused, although efforts are made to bring a mental health lens to such modules. In addition, the role of Practice Learning Placements was recognised as contributing to 50% of students' education and therefore, offer an opportunity to provide further mental health relevance to learning.
- **Theme 2 Practice Relevance and Educational Value:** Learning is valued primarily when it can be clearly applied to clinical practice. Students appreciate content they can directly relate to placements and simulation is highly valued because it bridges gaps in real-world exposure. Knowledge that cannot be translated into practice risks being perceived as irrelevant or inadequate.

- **Theme 3 Trauma-Informed and Lived-Experience-Led Teaching is a Major Strength:** Trauma-informed practice is embedded throughout undergraduate and postgraduate education, and the involvement of people with lived experience is viewed as essential and highly valued by students and educators.
- **Theme 4 Scaffolding Competence Across a Continuum of Learning:** Education is conceptualised as a progressive, staged development from foundational knowledge to advanced practice, though the pathway requires strengthening. There was a repeated emphasis on a 'scaffolding approach' from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. Learning is seen as cumulative and developmental, yet the system requires greater integration and continuity, minimising gaps between theoretical preparation, clinical application, and ongoing professional development. There was consensus across all providers that a regional, competency-based clinical career pathway is needed.
- **Theme 5 Placement Quality is Inconsistent and Constrained by Workforce Pressures and Placement Opportunities:** Participants stated that students report variability in placement learning opportunities, sometimes perceiving themselves as being used as support staff or alternatively, being unable to access involvement in therapeutic work. Across the group, participants emphasised that psychological skills are taught on the undergraduate programme and are valued, however, students report they are often unable to observe these skills applied in practice. Practice assessors would also benefit from up-to-date training to support the evaluation of students. Again, simulation was viewed as a key solution to fill gaps when placements cannot provide opportunities.

6.0 Summary of Key Findings and Areas for Development

The findings indicate that while there are clear strengths within current mental health education, particularly in trauma-informed and lived-experience approaches, there are systemic challenges that impact the consistency and effectiveness of learning.

Central to these challenges is the need for:

- Stronger alignment between education and clinical practice;
- Greater consistency in placement quality; and
- Improved integration across the learning continuum.

Addressing these issues will be critical to ensuring that students are adequately prepared for practice and that education meets evolving workforce needs.

Summary of Key Messages and Opportunities for Development
Mental health specific learning is highly valued with students strongly preferring modules with clear relevance to mental health practice.
Practice relevant learning drives engagement as students value learning that can be directly applied to clinical practice. Simulation is particularly effective in bridging theory–practice gaps.
Trauma informed and lived experience teaching is a core strength. The involvement of people with lived experience significantly enhances learning authenticity and impact.
Education is seen as a continuum, but progression between undergraduate, postgraduate, and practice lacks coherence. A scaffolded approach exists but requires stronger alignment and continuity. There is broad support for a regional competency-based career pathway.
Placement quality is variable. Psychological skills training is not consistently reinforced in placements and Practice Assessors may lack up-to-date training. Simulation is viewed as an important compensatory strategy.

7.0 Conclusion

A **more integrated, practice-aligned, and competency-based education system** is needed, one that:

- Maintains its strengths (trauma-informed, lived experience input and recovery focused);
- Addresses variability (placements, integration); and
- Ensures all learning is clearly relevant to real-world mental health practice.

This report presents the findings from a focus group exploring experiences and perspectives on mental health education across undergraduate and postgraduate pathways. Five key themes emerged, highlighting strengths in current provision, particularly trauma-informed and lived-experience-led teaching, alongside critical challenges related to practice relevance, placement quality, and the need for a more integrated and competency-based career pathway.

Overall, participants emphasised the importance of aligning education more closely with clinical practice, strengthening continuity across learning stages, and ensuring consistency in placement experiences.

Survey Questions

1.0 Education and CPD: survey for education providers (CEC)

Question No.	Question Text	Required to Answer?	Response Type
1	What are the key aspects of the current postgraduate prospectus that are most effective in preparing students for mental health nursing practice?	✓	Multi-Line Text
2	How do the educational programmes prepare postgraduate students/registrants to work with a diverse population across the lifespan? What changes are needed?	✓	Single Line Text
3	Is there specific course content, teaching methodologies, or assessment strategies that contribute significantly to postgraduate student learning and skill development?	✓	Single Line Text
4	Are there any therapeutic modalities or interventions that should be added to the postgraduate prospectus?	✓	Multi-Line Text
5	How effectively does the current prospectus assess postgraduate student's competency in therapeutic skills and their ability to deliver psychological and physical health interventions?	✓	Single Line Text
6	How well does the curriculum prepare postgraduate students for evolving roles through simulation- based learning, AI-enhanced placements and the integration of digital therapeutics?	✓	Single Line Text
7	Are there any physical health skills, area or interventions that should be added to the postgraduate prospectus?	✓	Multi-Line Text
8	What additional evidence-based skills and competencies should be included to prepare postgraduate students for future roles?	✓	Multi-Line Text
9	What are the main challenges and opportunities for mental health nurses pursuing postgraduate education?	✓	Multi-Line Text
10	How can the relationship between the educational providers and clinical areas be strengthened to enhance postgraduate mental health nurse education?	✓	Multi-Line Text
11	Any further comments?	✓	Multi-Line Text

2.0 Education and CPD: survey for education providers (postgraduate)

Question No.	Question Text	Required to Answer?	Response Type
1	What are the key aspects of the current postgraduate prospectus that are most effective in preparing students for mental health nursing practice?	✓	Multi-Line Text
2	How do the educational programmes prepare postgraduate students/registrants to work with a diverse population across the lifespan?	✓	Single Line Text
3	Is there specific course content, teaching methodologies, or assessment strategies that contribute significantly to postgraduate student learning and skill development?	✓	Single Line Text
4	Are there any therapeutic modalities or interventions that should be added to the postgraduate prospectus?	✓	Multi-Line Text
5	Do you think practice assessors are adequately prepared for their role to assess competency and sign-off postgraduate students? Do you think practice supervisors are adequately prepared for their role? Is there enough supervision?	✓	Single Line Text
6	How are postgraduate educational programmes preparing students for evolving roles through simulation- based learning, AI-enhanced placements and the integration of digital therapeutics?	✓	Single Line Text
7	Are there any physical health skills courses that should be added to the postgraduate prospectus?	✓	Multi-Line Text
8	What additional evidence-based skills and competencies should be included to prepare postgraduate students for future roles?	✓	Multi-Line Text
9	What are the main challenges and opportunities for mental health nurses pursuing postgraduate education?	✓	Multi-Line Text
10	How can the relationship between the university/ educational providers and clinical areas be strengthened to enhance postgraduate mental health nurse education?	✓	Multi-Line Text
11	Any further comments?	✓	Multi-Line Text

3.0 Education and CPD: survey for education providers (undergraduate)

Question No.	Question Text	Required to Answer?	Response Type
1	What are the key aspects of the current undergraduate prospectus that are most effective in preparing students for mental health nursing practice?	✓	Multi-Line Text
2	How do the educational programmes prepare undergraduate students to work with a diverse population across the lifespan?	✓	Single Line Text
3	Is there specific course content, teaching methodologies, or assessment strategies that contribute significantly to undergraduate student learning and skill development?	✓	Single Line Text
4	Are there any therapeutic modalities or interventions that should be added to the undergraduate curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
5	How effectively does the current undergraduate curriculum assess student's competency in therapeutic skills and their ability to deliver psychological and physical health interventions?	✓	Single Line Text
6	Do you think practice assessors are adequately prepared for their role to assess competency and sign-off students?	✓	Single Line Text
7	Do you think practice supervisors are adequately prepared for their role? Is there enough supervision?	✓	Single Line Text
8	How well does the curriculum prepare students for advancements in digital technology such as remote delivery, AI assisted note taking / report writing?	✓	Single Line Text
9	Are there any physical health skills, area or interventions that should be added to the curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
10	What additional evidence-based skills and competencies should be included to prepare students for future roles?	✓	Multi-Line Text
11	How can the relationship between the university/ educational providers and clinical areas be strengthened to enhance mental health nurse education?	✓	Multi-Line Text
12	Any further comments?	✓	Multi-Line Text

4.0 Education and CPD: survey for education providers

Question No.	Question Text	Required to Answer?	Response Type
1	What are the key aspects of the current undergraduate curriculum that are most effective in preparing students for mental health nursing practice?	✓	Multi-Line Text
2	How do the educational programmes prepare students/registrants to work with a diverse population across the lifespan?	✓	Single Line Text
3	Is there specific course content, teaching methodologies, or assessment strategies that contribute significantly to student learning and skill development?	✓	Single Line Text
4	Are there any therapeutic modalities or interventions that should be added to the curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
5	How effectively does the current curriculum assess student's competency in therapeutic skills and their ability to deliver psychological and physical health interventions?	✓	Single Line Text
6	How effectively do student placements support the application of therapeutic knowledge and skills in the real- world settings and what challenges, if any, need addressing to optimise learning outcomes?	✓	Multi-Line Text
7	What level of supervision and assessment is provided to students by experienced mental health nurses and other healthcare professionals during placements. And how are they prepared for this role?	✓	Single Line Text
8	How well does the curriculum prepare students for evolving roles through simulation- based learning, AI-enhanced placements and the integration of digital therapeutics?	✓	Single Line Text
9	How comprehensive is the range of physical health skills taught in the curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
10	Are there any physical health skills, area or interventions that should be added to the curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
11	What additional evidence-based skills and competencies should be included to prepare students for future roles?	✓	Multi-Line Text
12	What are the main challenges and opportunities for mental health nurses pursuing postgraduate education?	✓	Multi-Line Text

13	How can the relationship between the university/ educational providers and clinical areas be strengthened to enhance mental health nurse education?	✓	Multi-Line Text
14	Any further comments?	✓	Multi-Line Text

5.0 Education and CPD: survey for education providers

Question No.	Question Text	Required to Answer?	Response Type
1	What are the key aspects of the current curriculum that are most effective in preparing students for mental health nursing practice?	✓	Multi-Line Text
2	Are there any gaps or weaknesses in the current curriculum that impact students' ability to address diverse mental health needs?	✓	Multi-Line Text
3	How comprehensive is the range of therapeutic skills taught in the curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
4	Are there areas of the curriculum that need adjustment to more effectively respond to evidence, service demand and emerging trends in mental health care?	✓	Single line text
5	How do the educational programmes prepare students/registrants to work with specific populations, such as children and adolescents, older adults, forensics, comorbidity, long-term conditions and at risk populations?	✓	Single Line Text
6	Is there specific course content, teaching methodologies, or assessment strategies that contribute significantly to student learning and skill development?	✓	Single Line Text
7	Are there any therapeutic modalities or interventions that should be added to the curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
8	How effective are current methods for assessing students' competency in therapeutic skills, such as role-playing, simulation, and direct observation?	✓	Single Line Text
9	Are there opportunities to enhance students' ability to adapt therapeutic approaches to engaging with people experiencing psychosis, and meeting the unique needs of diverse populations and cultural contexts?	✓	Single Line Text

10	How effective are student placements in applying knowledge and skills in real-world settings?	✓	Multi-Line Text
11	What is the level of supervision and mentorship provided to students by experienced mental health nurses and other healthcare professionals during placements. And how are they prepared for this role?	✓	Single Line Text
12	What tools/ measures are used to assess competency for psychological and physical health interventions?	✓	Single Line Text
13	Consider how simulation-based learning and AI in placements may enable students to practice their skills in a safe and controlled environment.	✓	Single Line Text
14	How comprehensive is the range of physical health skills taught in the curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
15	Are there any physical health skills, area or interventions that should be added to the curriculum?	✓	Multi-Line Text
16	What challenges do students face during placements, and how can these be addressed?	✓	Multi-Line Text
17	How well does the curriculum prepare students for the evolving roles of mental health nurses, including the use of digital therapeutics and integrated care models?	✓	Multi-Line Text
18	What additional evidence-based skills and competencies should be included to prepare students for future roles?	✓	Multi-Line Text
19	What are the main challenges and opportunities for mental health nurses pursuing postgraduate education?	✓	Multi-Line Text
20	How can the relationship between the university/ educational providers and clinical areas be strengthened to enhance mental health nurse education?	✓	Multi-Line Text
21	What are the skills and competencies that mental health nurses will need to thrive in these evolving roles, and how the curriculum can be adapted to meet these needs.	✓	Single Line Text

Higher Education Focus Group

Review of the Mental Health Nursing Education Model – Northern Ireland

- Audience: Undergraduate & Postgraduate lecturers, clinical educators, practice education facilitators
- Duration: 60 minutes
- Format: Facilitated discussion (6–10 participants ideal)

5.1 Welcome & Context (5 minutes)

Purpose (facilitator script):

“This focus group aims to inform the review of the Mental Health Nursing model for Northern Ireland, with a specific focus on how undergraduate and postgraduate education prepares nurses for current and future practice.”

Ground rules:

- No right or wrong answers;
- Speak from experience;
- Respect confidentiality; and
- Focus on systems, not individuals.

5.2 Current curriculum: strengths and gaps (10 minutes)

Opening question

- From your perspective, what aspects of the current mental health nursing curriculum are most effective in preparing students for practice?

Probes

- Where does the curriculum works particularly well?
 - Integrating theory and practice?
 - Preparing students for contemporary service demands?
- What gaps or weaknesses most impact graduates' readiness for practice?

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- Are there areas where the curriculum has not kept pace with evidence, policy, or service transformation?

5.3 Preparing nurses for diverse populations and complexity (8 minutes)

Core question

- How well do current programmes prepare students to work with diverse populations and complex presentations?

Probes

- Children and adolescents
- Older adults
- Forensic services
- Comorbidity (mental health + physical health, substance use)
- Long-term conditions and at-risk populations
- Inequalities, trauma, and social exclusion
- Where are students most under-prepared when they arrive in practice?

5.4 Depth and breadth of therapeutic skills (10 minutes)

Psychological Skills

Core questions

- How comprehensive is the range of psychological skills currently taught?
- Which modalities are taught well, and which are missing or too superficial?

Probes

- CBT, trauma-informed approaches, crisis intervention, therapeutic engagement
- Working with psychosis and severe mental illness
- Cultural adaptation and equity-informed practice

Assessment

- How effective are current methods for assessing therapeutic competence?
 - Simulation
 - Role-play

- Direct observation
- How well prepared are practice assessors to assess these skills?

Physical health skills (brief contrast)

Core question

- How confident are graduates in delivering physical health care within mental health settings?
- Are there physical health skills or interventions that need strengthening or adding?

5.5 Student placements and practice learning (10 minutes)

Core questions

- How effective are current placements in enabling students to apply psychological and physical health skills?

Probes

- Quality and consistency of supervision and mentorship
- Preparation and support for practice assessors and supervisors
- Key challenges students face on placement

Future-focused

- What role could simulation-based learning or AI-enabled learning play in strengthening placement learning?
- Views on the 50/50 theory–practice split:
 - Does it work in reality?
 - Should it be more flexible?

5.6 The evolving role of the mental health nurse (10 minutes)

Core questions

- How well does the curriculum prepare students for the evolving role of mental health nurses in Northern Ireland?

Probes

- Early intervention and prevention
- Integrated care (e.g. primary care, GP-fed models)
- Digital therapeutics and technology

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- Increasing complexity and long-term conditions
 - Equality, diversity, inclusion, and human rights

Advanced competencies

- Research and evidence-based practice
- Public mental health
- Leadership and governance
- Policy development
- Personalised / precision mental health care

5.7 Postgraduate education and system alignment (7 minutes)

Core questions

- What are the main challenges and opportunities for mental health nurses pursuing postgraduate education?

Probes

- Commissioning cycles: what works and what doesn't?
- Preparation for specialist, advanced, and consultant roles
- Access, equity, and workforce planning

Partnerships

- How could HSC Trust–university relationships be strengthened?
- Views on:
 - Clinical–academic roles
 - Joint appointments
 - Research collaboration
- What are the main barriers to stronger partnerships?

5.8 Closing question and priorities (5 minutes)

Final reflective question

- If you could change one thing in mental health nursing education in Northern Ireland to improve future practice, what would it be?

Optional prioritisation

- Ask participants to identify:
 - Top 1–2 curriculum priorities
 - Top 1–2 system/structural priorities



5.9 Outputs for the review

This focus group will generate intelligence on:

- Curriculum strengths and deficits
- Fitness for future mental health nursing roles
- Alignment between education, placement, and workforce need
- Postgraduate and clinical-academic development pathways



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