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PARTNERING FOR WELLBEING AND ENABLING RECOVERY

Annex 4: Mental Health Student Nurse Survey Report



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1.0 Introduction

In 2025, the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council (NIPEC) led a mental health nursing review, aimed at developing a new regional Mental Health Nursing Model for Northern Ireland (NI). As part of this work, it was considered essential to capture the experiences of mental health student nurses, including opportunities to develop undergraduate training, in order to enhance educational learning, promote professional development and optimise clinical placement experiences. This survey sought to harness students' perspectives on contemporary practice, therapeutic nursing interventions, the academic curriculum and the future of Mental Health Nursing.

The future of mental health nursing care is intrinsically linked to the quality, preparedness, and aspirations of its emerging professional workforce. Mental health nursing students represent a vital cohort whose educational and clinical experiences during their training significantly shape their professional identity, competence, and future contributions to the mental health service model.

Harnessing students' perspectives on contemporary practice, their thoughts about the role of the mental health nurse, and their career aspirations will be paramount in shaping the future models of mental health nursing care, and in addressing the current and future service priorities. Further understanding of experiences, and challenges faced by students entering the mental health nursing profession is crucial for; informing educational, learning and professional development, improving clinical placement experiences, strengthening therapeutic practice and identifying factors influencing the transition and retention of mental health nurses during their initial years of practice.

2.0 Background and Purpose

A Mental Health Student Nursing Survey (Appendix 1), undertaken from June until September 2026, aimed to capture the views and experiences of mental health student nurses across the three university providers delivering undergraduate nursing education. The survey findings are intended to provide; formative feedback, inform curriculum development, capture progression towards the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) proficiencies and underpin our understanding of what is needed to further develop clinical placement experiences during mental health nurse training.

3.0 Methodology

The survey consisted of a structured 22-item questionnaire, incorporating a combination of Likert scale responses, multiple choice questions and free text comments. The survey was designed in collaboration with Senior Nurses in practice and academic professionals. Distribution was facilitated electronically using Microsoft Forms, enabling efficient data collection and anonymous participation. It was circulated to all undergraduate nurse training university providers in NI, including; Queens University Belfast (QUB), Ulster University (UU) and the Open University (OU) to share with mental health student nursing cohorts, and also promoted via various relevant social media platforms. Quantitative statistical data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative free text responses were reviewed thematically to identify recurring patterns, strengths, and areas for development.

4.0 Response Profile

A representative purposive sample of mental health student nurses in the three universities responded to the survey, representing the development stages of year 1, year 2 and year 3 undergraduate student nurses. Students reported experiences across a range of practice settings, including; primary care, secondary care and specialist services for Adult and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and Older People Services.

5.0 Pre-registration Training Programmes

Undergraduate mental health nurse training in Northern Ireland formally incorporates the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) *Future Nurse: Standards of Proficiency for Registered Nurses* (2018)¹, which were fully implemented by September 2020, alongside the requirements of the revised NMC *Standards for pre-registration nursing programmes* (NMC, 2023)². Together, these standards support a person-centred, recovery-focused, and evidence-based approach to care.

The main themes in the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) standards as they relate to pre-registration mental health nursing education, draw particularly on the *Standards of proficiency for registered nurses* (2018), which include field specific proficiencies for mental health nursing. These themes can be characterised and aligned with Northern Ireland priorities, as outlined in Table 1.

¹ Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2018) *Future nurse: Standards of proficiency for registered nurses*. London: NMC

² Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2023) *Standards for pre-registration nursing programmes*. London: NMC

Table 1: Main Strategic, Mental Health Nursing Education Priorities and NMC Proficiencies

NI Policy Priority	Relevant NMC Standards and Proficiencies	MH Nursing Education Focus	Evidence for Programme Documentation
Early Intervention and Prevention	Person-centred care; Public Health; Assessment and Decision-making	Holistic assessment, mental wellbeing promotion and anti-stigma practice	Curriculum content; community placements and service-user involvement
Right Support at the Right Time, with timely access to Crisis Care	Risk management; Safety and Communication	Crisis intervention, suicide prevention, trauma-informed care	Simulation learning; acute/crisis placements and OSCEs
Person-centred and Recovery-focused Care	Therapeutic Relationships; Shared decision-making and NMC Code (NMC, 2018)	Recovery models, strengths-based care, co-production	Learning outcomes; assessment strategies and lived-experience teaching input
Integrated and Community-based Services	Team working; Leadership and Care coordination	Multi-agency working, continuity of care and systems awareness	Placements and inter-professional learning
Workforce Development and Sustainability	Leadership; Delegation and Professional Development	Resilience, supervision and role readiness	Student support; leadership content and practice supervisor feedback
Reducing Inequalities and Supporting Vulnerable Groups	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Safeguarding and Lifespan care	Cultural competence and lifespan MH nursing	Module content; placement diversity and equality impact evidence
Evidence-based Practice and Digital Innovation	Research and Evidence; Quality Improvement and Digital Professionalism	Critical appraisal, QI and digital mental health literacy	Assessments; QI projects and digital learning resources
Ethical, Legal and Rights-based Practice	Law, Consent, Capacity; Professional Accountability and NMC Code (NMC, 2018)	Mental Health law, human rights and least-restrictive practice	Law teaching; reflective assignments and governance documentation

6.0 Survey Thematic Findings

Survey findings were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2021)³ six-phase model of thematic analysis. This method is used in identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning and themes within qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke (2021)⁴ this offers a flexible, step by step approach which allows an exploration of respondents' experiences, while emphasising transparency, reflexivity and theoretical clarity. These were mapped to the NMC standards, with consideration of all of the stages of undergraduate student nurse development.

The reported data is collective of all responses across all stages of Mental Health Nurse training.

- **Theme 1: Professional culture** - despite encountering challenging professional cultures in clinical settings, mental health nursing students valued the development of therapeutic relationships as the cornerstone of mental health care and are motivated to promote the distinct role and expertise of the mental health nurse. Mental health nursing students identified negative workplace cultures in clinical settings often manifested through judgmental peer interactions and a lack of respect for staff, which was detrimental to the student experience. Key issues included toxic "team judgment", directly correlated with a variance in student enjoyment, resulting in inconsistent learning opportunities.
- **Theme 2: Learning environments and placements** - mental health undergraduate student nurses emphasised the value of quality clinical placements that provide appropriate supportive clinical learning opportunities, aligned to their stage of training. They reported a variance in such opportunities, particularly around the observation of therapeutic interventions carried out by registrants. These concerns included; a lack of structured clinical learning, limited protected clinical learning time and variable exposure to a range of mental health nursing therapeutic interventions and psychological approaches. Students aspired to having a greater focus in their training on specific mental health conditions, and their care and treatment. Positive learning outcomes on placement were identified as enablers for building professional confidence, knowledge, skills and behaviours. Mental health undergraduate student nurses described the importance of inclusivity, supportive learning environments that recognise the transition into higher education and into professional clinical practice. Positive experiences were associated with greater clinical and academic support during placements. Students strongly narrated that the curriculum felt

³ 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 Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.



“too generic” and “adult nursing focused”, and not specialised enough to include the nuances of mental health nursing.

- **Theme 3: Educators and assessors** - access to consistent placement supervision and formative feedback were identified as essential, to optimise learning opportunities. Students highlighted the positive impact of high-quality assessors and supervisors which significantly enhance learner experiences by fostering a supportive, engaging, and constructive environment that directly promotes skill acquisition, professional development, and the enjoyment of the clinical placement. Thus, emphasising the need for experienced staff with expert knowledge in the learning topic, to work collaboratively with educators to ensure theory is aligning with their clinical practice placement and skills acquisition.
- **Theme 4: Student support and wellbeing** - mental health student nurses reported that balancing clinical practice, academic study and home life was at times challenging. They expressed some anticipatory anxiety about having confidence to provide individual therapeutic interventions, managing their personal safety, and regulating emotional and personal wellbeing. Some students related that university support networks do not prepare them fully for the impact of potential professional “burn out” in clinical practice settings. Some students perceive the role of registrants as being predominately administrative in nature. Despite these concerns, students are proactive in accessing support from academic and clinical staff. On occasion they avail of staff and peer support networks to promote positive mental and emotional wellbeing, preparing them from professional clinical practice.
- **Theme 5: Developing professional identity and preparedness for practice** - significant proportion of students expressed anxiety about their readiness to practice as a registrant in the clinical environment with two thirds of respondents having identified anxieties about working within clinical practice when qualified. They reported a lack of specific mental health focus in the academic curriculum, which they felt did not prepare them sufficiently for clinical practice. In contrast, over a third of students reported feeling prepared for clinical practice into the future. This highlights the importance of strengthening and maximising learning opportunities, including; fostering a robust culture in clinical environments that bridges the gap between theory and practice to maximise academic learning.

7.0 Summary of Key Findings and Areas for Development

Understanding the experiences of undergraduate mental health nursing students is crucial for informing educational provision, supporting professional development, and enhancing clinical placement quality. Accordingly, this survey explored student perspectives on contemporary clinical practice, therapeutic nursing interventions, academic curricula, and the future direction of mental health nursing, identifying areas for improvement to inform future education and workforce development initiatives.

A summary of mental health student nurse key strengths and opportunities for development, reflecting the identified undergraduate learning needs, in conjunction with NMC requirements is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Key Messages and Opportunities for Development

Summary of Key Messages and Opportunities for Development
Increase curriculum focus on mental health specific disorders, treatment interventions, pharmacology and therapeutic interventions.
Emphasise the need for consistency in providing supporting evidence within the portfolio across the 3-university curriculum and the Mental Health Northern Ireland Practice Assessment Document (NIPAD). Maintain a standardised approach to portfolio evidence across the three-university curriculum and the Mental Health NIPAD.
Reinforce positive clinical learning environments to optimise learning outcomes and strengthen mental health nursing, professional identity and culture. Cultivate supportive clinical environments to maximise educational success, nurture professional identity, and build a strong, healthy culture within mental health nursing.
Greater exposure to early intervention and preventative mental health strategies. Broadening the integration of preventive mental health frameworks and early-stage intervention models.
Expanding inter professional learning opportunities within mental health practice.
Strengthened proficiency, knowledge, skills and behaviours in the management and de-escalation of aggression.

8.0 Conclusion

The Mental Health Student Nursing Survey (NIPEC, 2025), provided valuable insights into the experiences of undergraduate mental health nursing students from across the



three universities within Northern Ireland, leading to suggested enhancements to the pre-registration mental health nursing education system. In addition, it provides insightful personal reflections on the future of mental health nursing practice, with recommendations for further development.

Appendix 1

Mental Health Student Nursing Survey Questionnaire
Q 1. Which year of undergraduate mental health nurse training are you currently on?
Q 2. Do you have previous mental healthcare experience (formally or informally) as a care giver?
Q3. Do you feel your mental health nursing programme prepares you to be a reflective mental health nurse?
Q 4. What are the core mental health nursing values that underpin and inform your daily clinical practice?
Q 5. Have you any anxieties about working in the clinical field?
Q6. Please explain your above answer:
Q7. In your opinion, how could you be better prepared to attend clinical settings?
Q8. Do you think the current mental health curriculum provide you with knowledge/skills for undertaking the requirements of clinical practice?
Q 9. Please explain your above answer:
Q10. What framework or model/s of mental health nursing practice have you used in clinical practice settings?
Q 11. Please provide further information on your above answer and advise which clinical practice settings you have used these framework/s or model/s:
Q 12. What are the specific nursing skills that you have used in clinical practice?
Q 13. Please provide further information on your clinical practice setting:
Q 14. Outline psychological therapies interventions which were undertaken by your practice assessor in clinical settings, and consider your role in undertaking the delivery of these therapies?
Q15. Please provide further information on your above answer:
Q 16. Do you feel equipped to deliver these treatments in line with best practice evidence and guidance?
Q 17. Please explain your above answer:
Q 18. Which clinical experiences have you found enjoyable?
Q 19. Please expand on why you found them enjoyable:
Q 20. How prepared do you feel working with children and families in clinical practice?
Q 21. Please explain your above answer:
Q 22. Thinking about the future of mental health nursing practice, what recommendations would you make for its development?



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